

# **BITTEN APPLES**



Ramsay Williams

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# Bitten Apples

A NOVEL



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**TO MARK BRANDEL  
WHO WADED THROUGH THEM ALL**



**‘These are the youths that thunder at a playhouse,  
and fight for bitten apples – ’**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**



# 1

As he turned into an untidy gravel drive and curved around the straggly row of trees, Conrad felt disappointed at Luke Barney's house. It just wasn't what he expected a film star to own. The rambling two-storey structure which emerged, clinging to the slope of the canyon, resembled a nondescript New England farmhouse rather than the dwellings commonly pictured in the movie magazines. The driveway ended abruptly in a lawn set with flagstones whose edges were blurred by persistent Bermuda grass. Closer now, Conrad saw that the shingles on the roof of the main house were weather-beaten and its small adjacent building, which he correctly assumed to be the garage, needed painting. The late afternoon sun filtered dimly into the deep canyon. In the trees along the road birds resumed the singing interrupted by the passing of his car.

The front door was ajar but Conrad pushed the bell and waited on the doorstep. He was wondering whether he ought to ring again when the door swung open and a middle aged, light-skinned coloured woman appeared. She wore a yellow smock and her hair, straight and fine rather than kinky, was pulled back in a tight bun. She wore rimless glasses and there was no trace of southern accent as she spoke.

'Yes, sir?'

'I'm Conrad Eldred. Is Luke Barney at home?'

'How do you do, Mr Eldred?' She smiled hospitably.

'Mr Barney was expecting you but he had to go into town

all of a sudden on business. He told me to tell you to make yourself at home. Maybe you'd like to join Mr Guilfoyle and the rest of them out at the pool? If you'll just follow me, I'll show you where it is.'

She stepped out on to the porch and closed the door. As he followed the maid's purposeful steps around the side of the building, Conrad was thinking that Mr Guilfoyle could only be one man.

When Patrick Guilfoyle was discussed around the Broadway bars, it was with mingled self-satisfaction and envy. The self-satisfaction was because those present could all feel superior, for Patrick was one of that number who are attracted to the entertainment field but display no real talent. But some envied his hearty charm, manifested mainly in an inexhaustible fund of Irish stories 'told in music-hall dialect. He was agreeable and fun at parties and because he cheerfully accepted others' estimation of his ability people liked to have him around. Some women were attracted to him—their invariable adjective was 'cute'—and most men liked him, providing they had no objection to his professional Irishness.

Patrick thought the world was a club. He had been a hot-shot pilot in the Second World War and one vitriolic Sardi's denizen claimed that he still carried a short-snorter in the display portion of his wallet instead of an Equity card. It was right after VE day that Patrick Guilfoyle had first appeared on the Broadway scene, wearing a natty uniform, a crumpled, fifty-mission garrison cap and a ruptured duck. For several weeks he was a conspicuous figure in the offices of directors and producers, and was also to be seen in the evenings in the bars and restaurants of the theatrical district. Since he had as much right to call himself an actor as many of the others who made the daily rounds of the casting offices, he was soon invited to

the inexpensive beer busts and charade parties which comprised the social life of the unemployed actors and actresses.

Suddenly he had vanished, which was not surprising as each summer saw the disappearance of many of the young hopefuls from the previous autumn. Some, although they stayed in New York, transferred to steadier and more lucrative fields of endeavour, their only connexion with the theatre being the purchase of balcony tickets to hit shows or occasional visits to Ralph's and Sardi's, where they bought more drinks than they could afford in a vain effort to recapture the earlier, more care-free days. Others simply went home to Ohio or Maine or the Bronx to become the guiding spirit of the local little theatre. A few like Luke Barney had achieved the cherished goal of fame and stardom.

Not Patrick. He had taken what remained of his army savings and gone to Hollywood. Over the years tidings of him became less frequent as the people who remembered him became fewer until he was only casually mentioned by the regular New York-Hollywood commuters with 'At Liberty' tans and laundry-turned shirt collars. Although Luke, Conrad and Patrick had all been starving actors together in those days, Conrad was not sure if Patrick would even remember him but the Irishman bounded over, cocky and jaunty as ever. His bright yellow swim trunks adorned a sturdy short body burnt deep red beneath a jungle of freckles. His red hair was cropped in a close crew cut and he stood even more erect, as if hiding the beginnings of a paunch.

'Well, Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Look who's here. Conrad Eldred! When did you get into town?'

'This morning.'

'How's everything in New York?'

**'The same. You know.'**

**'How do you like this climate?' He gestured towards the sun as if it was a picture in his living-room and, nodding dismissal to the maid, he began to pull Conrad back towards the house. 'Come on, I'll get you some trunks. You might as well have a little dip. Does Barney know you're in town?'**

**Conrad laughed and disengaged his arm. 'I hope so. He invited me to dinner.'**

**'Well, that's just like him. He never says anything to anybody. He had to go in town to see his agent but he ought to be back soon.'**

**They entered a building which might once have been a wood-shed but was now converted into a changing room. Patrick opened one of the steel lockers and tossed Conrad a pair of trunks and a towel.**

**'Climb into these, Conrad,' he said with locker-room heartiness. 'I think they'll fit, okay. You'll have to meet the crew.'**

**The crew proved to be two extremely attractive girls of about twenty, clad in Bikini bathing suits. One waved from the chlorine-green water of the pool. The other girl was reclining in a deck chair. Her brilliant copper hair, which glinted in the spring sunshine, was dry and was topped by a jaunty white knit affair with a blue pompon, sold in the stores as a Las Vegas cap. The swimmer was named Debbie and her companion was Sherry. They might have been sisters, especially since Debbie's hair was concealed beneath her bathing cap. Their faces were chiselled and their bodies were firm and beautiful. Both girls had a deep golden tan which made Conrad conscious of his own milky pallor. He said 'Hi' and dived into the water, grateful for the concealment it offered as well as its coolness.**

Patrick plied Conrad with questions about New York, but of the large circle Patrick had met in his brief time only a handful of diehards remained. No effort was made to bring the girls into the conversation and they said nothing unless directly addressed. However, when New York was exhausted as a topic there was no lull. Patrick pulled himself from the pool and, facing them as if they were an audience, told a blue joke about a priest and a washerwoman. The girls greeted the end of it with laughter although Conrad wondered that they had not heard the story before. Conrad had, and he was not at all sure that it hadn't been Patrick Guilfoyle who had first told it to him, some thirteen years before.

As the barrage of jokes continued unabated Conrad swam lazily, grateful for a chance to collect his thoughts. He hoped that the Broadway grapevine was correct when it said Luke Barney had not 'gone Hollywood.' It probably was, he reflected, for any gossip about a celebrity that was complimentary was likely to be true. Besides, Luke's sporadic letters had given no indication of a swollen head and had invariably ended with the enjoinder to 'come to Hollywood and look me up'.

Nevertheless, Conrad felt a certain constraint about the forthcoming meeting. People change a good deal over the span of a dozen years, and it had been that long since Luke Barney had rushed into the midtown Manhattan apartment which they shared with the dramatic announcement that he had signed a movie contract. Conrad had not expected to see him. Luke was on a tour which was not due to close for another two months, but he had been spotted by Millic himself at a matinée. Before the evening performance Luke had entered his signature alongside that magic name on a contract for 750 dollars a week and given his notice to the show. He

was expected to report to the studio immediately and Conrad had helped him pack, seeing him off on the train with a half full bottle of blended whisky from the apartment 'bar'.

Although he had not seen Luke since then Conrad had followed his career, noting increased billing at the theatres and more frequent mention in the syndicated film columns. Once in a while Luke came to New York, but Conrad had been out of town or even, on two occasions, out of the country. Neither of them was the type to pay attention to formal holidays, so Christmas and birthdays went unnoticed but Conrad, who was something of a vagabond, sent an occasional card or letter from some unexpected place in the world. Luke had answered promptly, although somewhat illegibly, with brief summaries of his activities in Hollywood. It was on the basis of these letters, less than fifteen of them in the twelve-year period, that Conrad was swimming beneath the warm California sun, now making its benevolent descent towards the rim of Topanga Canyon.

'Well, I see you got here.' Luke stood at the edge of the pool grinning down at him. 'Did you have trouble finding the place?'

Conrad saw at once that the years had been good to Luke Barney. His thinnish figure had filled out and his features had taken on character. He had high cheek-bones and the sharp planes of his jaw made his face resemble a perfectly made geometric object, which balanced and proved from every angle. He stood well over six feet in canvas shoes topped by faded denims and a skin tight white Basque shirt. Since Conrad had last seen him he had changed from a good-looking boy to a handsome man. Some rapid mental arithmetic set Luke's age at just under forty.

**'Not too much,' Conrad answered, 'but why didn't you say you lived way up in the mountains?'**

**'Nobody lives in Hollywood any more.' Luke stuck out his hand and Conrad reached out of the water to take it. Instead of shaking hands Luke pulled him out of the water. Conrad braced his foot against the side of the pool and came up dripping.**

**'How do you like this weather?' Luke said, wiping his wet palm on the dungarees.**

**'Great.'**

**'You met the girls, didn't you? And you remember Pat.'**

**'Yeah, we've been cutting up old touches about New York.'**

**Conrad turned to include the group in his remark and noticed that they were standing in a line on the edge of the pool, like troops for inspection or supers in a big musical.**

**Luke Barney looked at his wrist-watch. 'I guess I've got time for a work-out before dinner. I'm going to change. Be right back.' He strode off to the changing room.**

**With a casualness Conrad could not help thinking was assumed, Patrick and the two girls gathered up their towels, sun glasses and bottles of oil and departed for the house. Patrick winked at Conrad over his shoulder.**

**'I've got to open up the bar so we can have a little chug-a-lug before dinner.'**

**Debbie giggled and Patrick put a freckled arm around her bare shoulders, maintaining his hold as they squeezed through the doorway together. Sherry waved and followed them. Then Luke Barney came out of the little locker room wearing nothing but a jock strap and lugging a bar-bell of the type used by professional weight lifters. He was deeply tanned, and the strain of the heavy weight brought his muscles out in hard, choppy relief.**

'Do you want me to give you a hand?' Conrad asked.

Luke grinned. His teeth were white and even. He seemed to smile more often than Conrad had remembered.

'That's what I get for being a leading man. I have to work out with these frigging things twice a week.'

'Well, there's no doubt they help your appearance.' Conrad surveyed Luke Barney's strong, symmetrical body with the impersonal interest of a fellow actor.

'Yeah. I feel good, too.'

'I was sort of surprised to see Pat Guilfoyle, I haven't heard of him for years'

'Oh, he's around quite a lot. Always good for a laugh. He's got it made. He married Molly Morgan. You remember her, she was a big star in the silent days—before the government grabbed nine-tenth's of your salary—well, she's got plenty of money and she takes care of the boy. He's on his own as long as he shows up to escort her to *premieres* and the Academy dinner.'

The star placed the big dumb bell carefully on a hemp mat behind the diving board. He stood back and looked at it attentively, as if it were some sleeping animal for which he was devising a strategy of capture. He flexed his muscles and stretched like a cat, then deliberately lifted the weight over his head. He held it aloft for an instant, and gradually lowered it again to the mat. He repeated the operation ten times, counting and talking in grunts.

'I thought it was a lot of crap myself. Four! But I'm sold now. Swimming, fencing, tennis—none of them do you a damn bit of good. Five! The only kind of exercise that really does anything for you—six!—is exercise against resistance. That's what brings the muscles out. Seven!'

'It may bring them out.' Conrad agreed. 'But once they're out can you use them for anything? That is, anything but lifting another weight.'

'Still the intellectual approach, huh? Ten!' Luke laughed and wiped the perspiration from his brow with a forearm. His body glistened and had the detailed perfection of Greek statuary. 'There's more than one way to use the weights.'

He backed up to the dumb bell and lifted it over his back.

'You can overwork and then you wind up muscle bound—one!—like those jerks on the *Health and Strength* covers. Two! Or you can work easy for definition. That's the way I do it Three! Definition only brings out and toughens up muscles that are already there. Four! You feel good, your clothes fit you, and you never have to worry about a close up—five!—with your shirt off. You ought to try it for a while.'

'No thanks. I'm not a leading man I understand it's still acceptable for a character man to be flabby.'

'Not as much as it used to be '

Luke Barney worked for three quarters of an hour with the bar bells and, as his breathing became heavier, there was no more talk Conrad practised diving from the board. The sun had disappeared behind the the wall of the canyon, and the air was taking on a slight chill. At last Luke ended the final exercise with a triumphant 'Ten!' and plunged into the pool, swimming its length rapidly with a formless but powerful crawl. He pulled himself out at the shallow end, dug in his ear with a finger and shook his head like a dog.

'Let's get dressed, huh, Con? I could sure as hell use a drink.'

They had drinks and dinner, followed by more drinks.

On the surface at least, Luke had changed very little from the days when they had lived together. He had always been personally anarchistic, belligerently unpretentious, and a social conservative. None of these views had altered appreciably in the intervening years, any more than his frequently stated belief that women were only good for two things, except that some of them couldn't cook. He still drank a lot and it was apparent that he had not given up being the hard-playing, fast-living actor, a role he had always admired in the late Jack Barrymore.

Luke's living-room bore out the rural feeling of the house. It was large, with high raw beams and dark rough furniture grouped around a big open fireplace. An inconspicuous Capehart played songs from old Broadway musicals, records by the original casts. The phone rang continuously, as it had all through dinner. Most of the time the maid, whose name was Clara, would answer it taking down numbers where the callers could be reached. Occasionally, if it was very important, Luke would retire to a small office to answer personally. Ordinarily, he explained, he put in an hour at the phone twice a day, thus keeping the rest of his time free.

Patrick filled in with stories

'—so the old Irishman says, "Faith, and I'm afther tellin' ye the thruth. How could you stand there and accuse me of bein' drunk?"

"Whist, now, pwhat's that I'm smellin' on your breath?" says the priest.

"It's nothin'," says Pat. "Only a little Three Fathers, Feather "'

And Patrick's laugh rang over the crackle of the fire. The girls laughed too, and Debbie, whose hair was now revealed to be a glaring blonde, took Patrick's arm.

'Come on, honey. Let's us go down to the bar and fix another round of Three Fathers,' she said, giggling.

'A pregnant idea mavourneen, a pregnant idea.'

Debbie drew back in horror, overplaying to show that she was really kidding. 'Wait a minute, bud. I don't like the way you say pregnant.'

'The way I say it is nothing to the way I do it,' Patrick replied broadly. 'Anyway, it's only a minor inconvenience and think of the fun you'll have.' As they went down the stairs Patrick, stepping slightly out of character, started a story about a Jewish marriage broker.

Conrad, who had never known Guilfoyle particularly well, wondered if he might have some deep-seated fear of tragedy which he could only ward off with a noisy insistence that it wasn't there.

Sherry moved over to the couch in front of the fireplace and knelt on it close to Conrad. Her cross seemed almost volitionless, an automatic response to the stimulus of the others' absence. She wore a tight white sweater and close fitting red pedal pushers, an outfit somehow even more suggestive than her brief swim suit. Her skin was youthful, fair and smooth, and the lids of her wide brown eyes glistened softly in the firelight. Conrad restrained an impulse to run his finger over them in search of tell-tale vaseline. The metallic red hair was cut in a short curly poodle cut.

'Hi,' she said, seductively.

'Hi,' Conrad said.

She sat on the couch next to him, one bare closely shaven leg tucked under her.

'How do you like this weather?' And her tone suggested that it offered unmentionable delights.

'Great.' Conrad proffered the cigarette box at his elbow. Sherry wet her lips with her tongue. The cigarette

stood out chalk white against the shining red of her lipstick. An experienced seducer might have pulled a burning stick from the fire but Conrad used a match.

'Do you work for one of the majors?' she crooned.

For an instant Conrad wondered how baseball came into it and then realized she was talking about pictures.

'Uh-uh,' he said. 'I just got here from New York.'

'Yeah? Gee, I've never been to New York.'

'You haven't? We're even, I've never been here before.'

'Really?' There was disbelief. 'Are you going to stay out here?'

Conrad smiled. 'Well, that depends on a lot of things.'

'What things?' Sherry leaned closer to him, attentive, the little woman being a help to her man who had so many important things on his mind

'Whether I can make a living out here, primarily,' Conrad said bluntly.

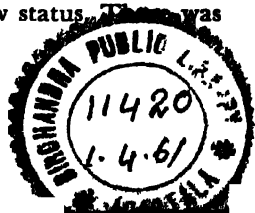
'Oh.' There was a pause. 'What do you do?'

'I'm an actor.'

'Oh.'

Sherry settled back and the atmosphere changed abruptly. Through cocktails and dinner there had seemed to be some unspoken agreement that she was to be his 'girl'. Since no one had told her otherwise she had optimistically assumed he might be a producer or director or writer—or at least someone who *knew* a producer or director or writer. But an actor—and without a contract! She was unable to conceal her disappointed resentment, and it hung palpably in the air between them. But though he was sorry for Sherry, Conrad also felt humiliated for himself and he did nothing to relieve the uncomfortable silence.

'What did you do in New York—plays?' Sherry's condescending tone established their new status. ~~It~~ was



no longer anything she wanted from him and she had relinquished the initiative. If he cared to be the pursuer, well and good. After all, a girl could have fun with actors, although it didn't pay to go out with them much of the time. But she was an actress herself, and while plays were not exactly movies, if Conrad would be real nice to her they might still salvage a few kicks from the wreckage of the evening.

'Yeah, I did some plays.' Conrad replied. 'What about you? I'll bet you're an actress.'

'That's right.' Sherry affected a blasé yawn. The firelight caught a flash of white teeth.

'Do you work for one of the majors?'

The mouth snapped shut and she peered at Conrad suspiciously. His face showed nothing but grave interest. Warily at first, and then more rapidly she went on. Her flat and colourless voice took on an edge of excitement. She no longer was blurring her sentences together in what she thought to be a sexy fashion.

'I'm entered in the Miss Los Angeles contest. If I win I'm entered in the Miss Universe contest. But even if I don't win that I get a screen test—that is, if I win the Miss Los Angeles.'

'Oh. What happens then?'

'What do you mean, what happens then? I get a screen test. You probably think it's easy for a girl. Well, let me tell you, chum, it isn't. Anybody can be Miss East Over-shoe, Idaho, or the queen of some corny industry. But I'm running for Miss Los Angeles. And it isn't easy getting to be Miss Los Angeles. Show business is tough.'

'I hope you win,' he said.

'I've got a good chance,' she replied confidently. 'It makes everything easier that way—you know, you get publicity and you get to meet a lot of people.'

It had never occurred to her to wonder if the experience she had had, and her knowledge of acting craft was enough to pass the test should she get it. Sherry gazed into the fire, lost in a world of night-clubs, movie columns, and glittering *premières*. Conrad was embarrassed, and at the same time annoyed that she should be so fatuous. He was also annoyed with Luke Barney, although the situation was merely another indication that he had not changed. He had always shared women as he did his other possessions—liberally. And while Luke's motives were of the kindest Conrad could not help feeling awkward at the thought that she might have been touted on to him by the star. He had never been able to make Luke understand how unsatisfactory he found that sort of relationship. For a year after Luke had become acquainted with Freud he had referred to himself as a satyriast.

'Have you known Luke very long?' Sherry jarred into the context of his thoughts, although the overly careless way she said the name suggested that her own acquaintance with Luke was recent.

'About fifteen years,' Conrad answered shortly.

The girl regarded him with new interest. 'Was he always like he is now?'

'Pretty much, I guess. I haven't seen him for a while myself, and I didn't get much chance to talk to him today. But I wouldn't say he's changed much. He never was the sort to have a big head. Or rather, he's always had a big head, but it doesn't seem to have gotten any bigger since he's been a star.'

'Then you must have known his wife?'

'Yes, I did, but I don't see any reason to go into that.' He began to wish the other would return.

'How come you've never been married?'

'Me? I've been married.'

'You didn't mention it.'

So the blithe Hollywood marital mores, of which he had so frequently read, were not overdrawn. Fascinated in spite of himself he went on. 'You assumed that because I didn't volunteer it right away I've never been married?'

'How many times?'

'I'd say six,' he replied dryly.

'Don't you even know?'

'It's hard to say.' He scratched his chin judiciously. 'Actually I only got a slip of paper once.'

'What?'

'You see, every woman—and there haven't been many—that I've ever lived with and, for want of a better word, loved. I've considered to be my wife. Once, purely for the sake of expediency, I went through the actual ceremony.'

Sherry shifted to the arm of the sofa. By saying something which he had reason to suppose would not make a good impression upon her he had disrupted the pattern. Their relationship could no longer proceed on the familiar basis with an aggressive male courtship ritual similar to the wooing of seals. Out of her depth, Sherry's response was edged with hostility.

'Well, if you loved all these girls how come you're not with any of them now?'

'They all left me. After they'd learned enough from me to get themselves a better guy, why should they hang around. Besides, I never got a single one of them a job in the movies.'

The conversation went no further, for a burst of laughter announced the return of Patrick Guilfoyle. He had a bottle tucked under each arm and was followed by Debbie and Luke carrying ice and glasses. The talk became general, mostly about Hollywood personalities

of whom Conrad had never heard. The party moved back and forth from the living-room to the bar, and later on in the evening, several more girls arrived in the company of a leading man Conrad had seen many times on the screen. This actor, who had gotten his start in show business on an oceanic liner, played the piano and sang. Sometime during the course of events Luke and the girl called Debbie disappeared into the bedroom which adjoined the bar. Conrad drank steadily and ignored Sherry for the rest of the evening. The last thing he remembered was Patrick pouring him into bed and taking a lighted cigarette from his limp unresisting fingers.

## 2

IN the morning Luke tossed a pair of jeans and a sweat-shirt on the bottom of Conrad's bed.

'Do you still want to go?'

'Go?'

'Yeah, sailing. Remember? You said you wanted to go sailing.' Luke grinned down at him and shook his head slightly, in sympathy for his hangover.

'Sure I want to go. Thanks for the clothes.'

Luke cooked breakfast himself, bacon and eggs, and they were out of the house into the grey morning. Luke stopped by Conrad's four-year old Buick convertible, still showing the dust from the cross-country drive.

'How does it run?'

'It got me here' Conrad smiled deprecatingly at the note of pride which had crept into his voice. 'It's fun to have a car again.'

Luke walked around the car. 'Where's your licence plate?'

'They only give you one in New York. Shall we take this one?'

'No,' Luke answered. 'We might as well go in mine. I know where to drive.'

Luke's boat, which he kept at San Pedro, was a twenty-footer salvaged from an old whaling vessel, and ketch rigged. Although seaworthy the boat had the same rather shabby appearance as the star's house and the Mercedes-Benz in which they had driven to the dock. Conrad

wondered whether the conspicuous lack-lustre of Luke's possessions was a reaction against the Hollywood tinsel—a sort of ostentation in reverse—or whether he was just indifferent to appearances. Conrad had little clue from the past, for Luke had had few possessions beyond his wardrobe which, being an actor, was always as impressive as possible.

They unloaded the gear from the car and carried it out the plank walk to where the ketch was moored. There was not much, a picnic basket of sandwiches prepared by Clara, and a full quart of I. W. Harper. Conrad, with an involuntary shudder, put the bottle carefully away in the boat's tiny cabin.

'I'd better warn you, Luke, I don't know anything about this sailing business. I spent three years in the navy but my small boat experience is limited to two afternoons on a cat boat in Long Island sound. I'm afraid I won't be much help to you.'

'Yeah, you told me that last night. Don't worry, Con, this thing practically sails itself. Just do what I tell you and we'll make out all right.' Luke gave Conrad a clear and concise briefing on the function of the two sails, the various lines, and the tiller. 'The wind's pretty good,' he concluded. 'And for once in my life I got down here in time to catch the tide. The tide can be a hell of a big help.'

'Like the one in the affairs of men, huh?' Conrad smiled. As Luke looked at him, puzzled. "'When taken at its flood leads on to fortune.'"'

'Omitted; "all the voyage of then life is bound in shallows and miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat; and we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures.'" ' Luke finished the quotation. 'I should have got it right away. It just goes to show what Hollywood

will do to you. I wish I could do some Shakespeare, but I don't have a big enough name.'

The next half-hour was devoted to raising sail and the tricky task of manoeuvring the ketch out of the shallow basin into the bay. Luke's few orders to Conrad were crisp and efficient and Conrad felt that he obeyed them well, although the lines tended to slip in his unaccustomed hand. Luke's movements were economical and sure and it was apparent even to Conrad's inexperienced eye that the star was a better than average sailor. When they came about for the final long tack out into the bay Luke mopped his brow with the back of his hand.

'Why don't you take the tiller for a minute, Con? Just don't let her luff—that's when the sail starts flapping because you don't have it full of wind. The sun's over the yardarm, my boy. Of course it's going up instead of down, but who gives a damn.' Luke laughed and ducked into the cabin.

Conrad grabbed the tiller, negligently at first with one hand, then, as he felt the surprisingly strong pull of the water, he shifted around sideways, and, bracing his feet against the side of the boat, used the strength of both arms, to maintain an even course. The sun, which had been just over the horizon as they boarded the boat, was rising rapidly in the morning sky and glaring hotly from the top of the choppy waves. Luke crawled out of the little cabin holding aloft a nearly empty I. W. Harper bottle. Conrad did a comic take and Luke laughed.

'It was left over from the last trip. I forgot about it but there's no use to waste it.' He unscrewed the cap, wiped the lip of the bottle with his palm and tilted it back. When the level was reduced by half he repeated the wiping process and handed the bottle to Conrad, who did not want a drink, but did not quite know how to say so.

He felt the warm whisky slide down his throat and as he handed the bottle back to Luke he forgot the tiller and the boat careened crazily for an instant. Luke grinned as he screwed the cap back on the quart.

'You got to watch it all the time,' he said. 'It's wonderful when you stop to think about it. Back in the Bible days they were using the same sailing methods. Man, they went all over the Mediterranean in boats no bigger than this one.'

'That's right,' Conrad said. 'But it's hard to believe they did it. I can remember a couple of times when a cruiser didn't seem like enough ship. I didn't know you were a bug on sailing.'

'I bought the boat the first year I had my contract. It's about the only way a guy can really get away from Hollywood. The only thing that man with all his science has never been able to lick is the sea. Sailors are the last real heroes.'

'Yeah!' Conrad answered.

Shortly after Pearl Harbour Conrad had enlisted in the navy, mainly because it seemed to promise less regimentation than the ground forces and offered a more direct appeal to his wander-lust. After nearly two years shoreside in the grubby crowded town of Norfolk, in his own home state of Virginia, he realized grimly that he should have joined the Air Force if he wanted to travel. Eventually, however, he was given sea duty on a cruiser in the Mediterranean fleet. While covering the invasion forces at Anzio he was hit in the shoulder by a strafing German plane. The wound became infected and after two months in the hospital he was surprised and happy to be handed his discharge.

Conrad's full realization of the futility of war, and especially of his role in it, was not borne home to him

until a year later when he worked in a show with an actor who had been an army sergeant. The sergeant, too, had been wounded at Anzio and it was his contention that he had been hit by shrapnel from his own navy. Conrad had served on a gunnery crew and knew that it could easily have happened since it had taken the navy gunners half an hour after the first infantry wave landed to find the range, and the subsequent waves had moved inland sometimes faster than the sights could be lifted. This chance encounter with a man who he himself might have shot left a bitter taste in his mouth and he was thereafter reluctant to discuss the war at all. Luke Barney had not been in the armed forces at all, although Conrad had never known the reason for his deferment.

They sailed out into the bay, alternating on the tiller, and Luke showed Conrad how to manipulate the sail to effect turns and increase or decrease speed. They had stripped to shorts and took turns diving over the side for a brief swim. The hot sun was beginning to burn Conrad's white skin and the cool water felt good on his back, the salt giving a pleasant tingle. When they had finished swimming they ate part of the lunch, washing the dry sandwiches down with gulps of water which had remained surprisingly cold in the thermos jug. Then Luke opened the fresh bottle of bourbon and they lay back, relaxed and comfortable, as the sturdy ketch glided through the water.

For a time they reminisced of the years they had tramped together in Federal Theatre, down-at-the-heels stock companies, and small town 'drama festivals'—of meals and lack of car fare. Conrad remembered those years well, indeed his lot was not much improved now, but Luke Barney remembered them better. He recounted details which Conrad had forgotten, of the time their

mutually owned rep theatre had folded because of a heartless landlord, or the time they had spent the night in a Maine gaol trying to explain to an implacable sheriff that they were only actors and had no money to pay the bills left by the departed company manager. He recalled parties in their New York apartment which Conrad had all but forgotten and he asked about people whom Conrad had not seen or thought of in years.

'How did you make out with Sherry, Con?' Luke asked as he passed the bottle.

Conrad shook his head. 'She found out I was an actor.'

'What did you tell her that for?'

'What did you want me to tell her? That I was a producer?'

'Why not? She's stupid enough to believe it. You should see some of the producers out here. You have to have some gimmick—like Pat and his dirty stories. He just tells them to get into some broad,' the star explained. 'To me it's a waste of time. Do you want to hear my favourite story?'

'Sure,' Conrad said.

'A guy goes up to a girl and says, "Let's screw." She says, "Your house or mine?" He says, "If you want to argue about it, forget it."'

'Still a gash hound, huh, Luke?'

'Why not?' he asked. 'That's what they're for. The only ones I won't pitch are gals on my pictures. You don't get your meat where you get your bread.'

Luke, of course, was perfectly serious. If he himself had never resorted to dishonest strategies to go to bed with a girl, it was only because his good looks and charm made them unnecessary. And as in the old days, Conrad could not help remonstrating.

'Do you really think that's fair?'

Luke laughed. 'Anything's fair in love and war. Anyway if you don't other guys will. In a way it's a good thing, too, because when she finally meets a real producer she'll have enough experience to give a good accounting of herself. They're always talking about how many jobs girls get on the casting couch. I wonder how many of them were *lost* there because the girl couldn't deliver the goods.'

'Not for me, Luke. I just couldn't do it.'

'You always did take women too seriously or maybe you've turned faggot, have you?'

'Not yet.' Conrad grinned. But not Sherry, please.'

'Why not? She's a good lay.'

'I thought you said she needed experience. Anyway, she's *too* stupid. She really believes if she wins that contest thing she's on her way to being a star.'

'She hasn't got a chance—they never give it to anyone from California. But she may be a star. She wouldn't be the first one. The women don't have to act here, in fact it's a handicap for most of them. Christ, all women are stupid. I don't see why you expect Sherry to be an exception.'

'Just as a matter of curiosity how many tests do they make in a year?'

'Of girls? Hundreds, maybe thousands. It's a common racket with the beauty contests. They give tests away for prizes. What does it cost for an operation like Excelsior to turn on a couple of lamps and shoot a few feet of film. It doesn't mean anything but it gives the kids in the studio school a chance to do a scene and the assistant directors a chance to get some tail.'

'She tried to pump me about Stella.'

'Oh.' Luke was silent for a minute. 'Have you seen her lately?'

'Not for a couple of years. She seems happy enough. She'd be okay if she could ever get the theatre bug out of her system. But then I guess we all would.'

Luke's brow knotted as he gazed into the sun. He had got an uncontested divorce from Stella about a year after he had come to the coast. At the time he was not big enough for the news to cause more than a ripple in the nation's Press, and Stella, though she would classify herself an actress, had done little more than a few seasons in stock. Her first summer as an apprentice she had met and married Luke Barney in the local white-painted church with Conrad as best man. The company had chipped in for some champagne, part of which the character man had poured into one of Stella's shoes and drunk an extravagant toast to the 'new Lunts'. The marriage, despite numerous rifts, had lasted six years. There had, of course, been some talk about him letting Stella down after she had stuck with him through the lean years, and that was apparently what was going through his mind now, for he turned to Conrad with explosive belligerence.

'Goddam it, Con, just because you're a star doesn't mean you can't outgrow somebody. A plumber or an insurance agent can change wives every day and nobody gives a damn, but because I'm a movie star I automatically become a shitheel. You know Stella and I never really got along. We were just kids. I would have left her years before if I could have afforded it. The only thing my picture contract did was give me the loot to pay for the divorce.'

'Take it easy, Luke. I didn't say any of this, you did. Anyway, I said Sherry *tried* to pump me, not that she did. I only mentioned that to show you how stupid she is.'

'Okay, I'm sorry. Have a drink.' Luke grinned and handed Conrad the bottle. 'There's so Goddam much

gossip in this town. It's like living in a goldfish bowl.' He obviously wanted to change the subject. 'I got in a beef with Millic about billing once and the next day one of the columnists said I was a "stormy petrel", and here's the laugh. That was the name of this boat when I bought it.'

Conrad leaned over the side trying to make out the faded letters on the bow.

'It's still the same,' Luke said. 'I was always going to change it, but after that column came out I never did.'

The boat drifted along under the cloudless sky.

'What are you going to do—get a job?' Luke asked in his characteristically blunt fashion.

Conrad smiled to himself. Luke's assumption was that Conrad was not there on a contract because, if he had been, he would have mentioned it before now. He had wondered when Luke would get around to asking him about his sudden and unexpected appearance in Hollywood. When Conrad had arrived yesterday he had checked into a hotel on Hollywood Boulevard and, knowing nobody, had immediately called Luke's answering service. The star himself called back that afternoon and asked Conrad out to dinner. They had done little save exchange formal platitudes on the phone and at the dinner there was no chance to be alone, due to the medieval court aspect Patrick and the others imparted to the house.

Luke had always been a good friend. He would, if able, feed or house a friend, lend a sports jacket or money although he had little of that when Conrad had known him. But Luke had always had his own personal version of what has lately come to be described as enlightened self-interest. He was profoundly serious about his career and nothing would be likely to dissuade him from any

action which he felt could further it. Show business was a dog-eat-dog affair and Luke had always recognized it as such, and the accomplished fact of the stardom he had so confidently predicted for himself, Conrad realized, only served to reassure him of the correctness of the monomaniacal course he had followed in its achievement.

'I guess so. I don't intend to starve.'

Luke sniffed and rubbed his nose with his thumb, like a fighter. His gestures had become more aggressively masculine in the slow Hollywood climb from Latin gangsters and drawing-room juveniles to rugged leading men. But beneath the theatrical motion was impatience with the ambiguity of Conrad's answer.

'You picked a hell of a time to come. All the majors are closing down. There's nothing left but independent shoestring producers who go on location to save dough. There are no more B pictures and they're making fewer A's every year.'

'Nuts!' Conrad said. 'Luke, they make more pictures here in a month than there are Broadway shows in a whole season. They'll make pictures, no matter what happens. And if they make pictures they've got to have actors. Besides, what about television? Half the shows I worked on last year aren't even on the air any more and most of the rest are going on film. It's all coming out here. Anyway, I haven't had a play in three years. New York's a dead issue.'

'You remind me of the two actors in convertibles who passed each other in Kansas. One was going east and the other was heading west. When they recognized each other they both yelled at the same time, "Go back, man, go back!"'

Conrad laughed.

'Well, I don't know, Con.' Luke was now serious. 'One

thing in your favour, you're a new face. That ought to help you some, and you're a good actor. I always said so, even way back in Federal Theatre days.'

He could never remember Luke saying anything of the kind, though he might have thought it. Struggling actors tend to save their encomiums for themselves, and Luke Barney had been no exception.

Conrad took a bow. 'Well all you have to do is to say that around where it counts and I'm in business.'

'What I say doesn't mean a damn thing.' Luke was immediately on the defensive. 'When the chips come down I'm nothing but another actor myself. Oh, I could take you around to meet the casting directors, but that wouldn't do you any good. No actor can get another actor a job.'

'Wait a minute, Luke. I haven't seen you in a long time so there's one thing we'd better get straight right from the start. I don't want anything from you. I've made a pretty fair living for myself in and out of the theatre for twenty years and I never needed your help to do it. I looked you up when I got to town because we used to be friends and because you asked me to in your letters. I don't know enough about the set up here to tell whether you could do me any good or not. All I'm telling you is that I'm not asking for anything. If I make it, great—if I don't, tough titty, as you always used to say.'

For a moment there was no sound but the waves lapping the ketch, punctuated by raucous screams of gulls as they power dived alongside looking for scraps from the lunch. Conrad watched the jaw muscles on Luke's face work as the star looked out over the shiny water. It had probably been some time since anybody talked to Luke Barney in such a straightforward fashion. But Conrad

had been disgusted and somewhat horrified by the fawning manner with which Patrick Guilfoyle and the girls had treated the star the previous evening.

'Okay, now I'll tell you something.' Luke turned to face Conrad, his elbows on his knees. 'Being a star isn't all it's cracked up to be. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. Even with the taxes I pull down a good-sized bundle every week. I've got a house, a car, a boat, three square meals a day—*every* day, and plenty of ass. But I earn it.'

Luke stood up and Conrad was sure, but for the physical limitations of the boat, he would have paced.

'I earn it. It isn't always like this. I'm just between pictures now. I get up early in the morning—and one of the reasons I first became an actor was to beat that—and work under those frigging lights all day long, then come home and stay up half the night answering fan mail. When I'm not on a picture I've got interviews, publicity pictures, dull parties where I have to slobber over a lot of frustrated old maids hoping that when they go home to play Philadelphia stinkfinger they'll dream of me. I have to watch my billing, watch my parts, watch my agent, watch my business manager, keep in touch with my fan clubs, play benefits for Nicaraguan milk funds or the Society for the Prevention of Acne. The phone rings twenty four hours a day and every time I pick up the receiver it's somebody who wants something. I get phone calls, letters, telegrams from thousands of people who claim they knew me in the old days. They had walk-ons in shows I was in. They went to high school with me. Their father was the doctor who brought me into the world—and you'd be surprised how many kids that old man had. Girls who claimed I laid them in a dressing-room in Toledo, or just plain nuts who never got a break

in their lives and because I did they figure I owe them something. Do you think it's any wonder I'm leery of people?'

Conrad reached and handed Luke Barney the whisky bottle. 'You'd better have a drink.'

The star took a deep swallow. 'I'm sorry I blew my top, but maybe it did me good to get it out of my system. Anyway, I didn't mean you. We were room mates, and if there's anything I can do to help you I'll be glad to do it. But it's really the straight goods, there's very little I *could* do.'

'Uh-uh, Luke, I meant what I said. I've got a good background. There isn't any reason why I shouldn't be able to work through the usual channels. Actually, it's much more important for me to have a friend out here than a connexion, so let's leave it on that basis.'

'“The usual channels”.' Luke snorted. 'Jesus, you really are a simpleton. Who's your agent?'

'I guess I'll need an agent.'

'You sure as hell will. You can't do anything out here without one. You are only as good as your agent in Hollywood. Who he is, how hard he works for you, who else he has under contract are taken as measures of your own talent. The hardest thing in Hollywood is to get any agent at all.'

'Well, I've got the names of several. I thought I'd try Marvin Lurey first.'

'He's good if he'll handle you. Do you know anything about him?'

'Not a hell of a lot. I've heard him mentioned around New York.'

'He'd be a good bet. He handles a lot of off-beat characters. A lot of agents don't want to handle anyone who isn't a leading man and therefore star material. Also,

he's not so big that you'd be lost in the shuffle. If he decides to handle you, he'll work.

'I say Lurey's always handled off-beat people, and I think I know the reason why. He's very handsome. He might have been a big star if they had been hiring Jews for leading men when he was younger. He was an actor once himself but never made much of a thing out of it. Actually that's another point in your favour. He started legitimate, not as a motion picture exhibitor or publicity man. He gets along with everybody out here and he's a damn good office actor.'

This was a point which they had often discussed. Luke maintained that talent on the stage, or whatever the medium happened to be, was often secondary to the presentation a performer made in the casting office. This he called office acting, and he claimed that once a producer was convinced in his office that you were right for a part nothing short of the most disastrous personal reviews after the play had opened would ever alter his opinion. Conrad was inclined to agree.

'You've never been out here before, have you?'

'No, I haven't,' Conrad answered. 'I guess I've always unconsciously saved Hollywood for an ace in the hole. Besides, I haven't looked right for pictures even if I had settled down long enough to crack them.'

Luke raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'That's a good point. How do I know you won't goof? You probably could have been somewhere by now if you didn't take off all the time.'

Conrad had to admit that his restless roving nature was a chief factor in his lack of success in the theatre. Conrad had talent but with it an unfortunate tendency to join a carnival or go on vagabond tour around the country whenever the going got rough or he became bored.

'That's a good question, Luke,' Conrad replied seriously. 'But what the hell—I'm nearly forty. I've had my fun, now I'm going to settle down and try to make myself a career. And, anyway, what you call goofing taught me a hell of a lot about being a good actor.'

'All right, Con. We've been through that one before. I don't think you'd throw me a deliberate curve, and besides we're buddies. I'll fix it up for you to see Marvin Lurey.'

'Look, Luke, I meant it when I said I didn't want to impose.'

'Forget it. It's no imposition. Lurey isn't my agent but I know him. I can set up an interview but in the final analysis my recommendation isn't worth a fart in a hailstorm. I wish you luck, buddy.'

Somewhat self-consciously the two men shook hands, and for the balance of the journey back to San Pedro discussed old acquaintances in New York.

When they arrived back in Topanga Canyon Luke suggested that Conrad stay with him, at least until he got well enough acquainted with the city to find a decent place to live. Conrad begged off, pleading that he must have some place to take his phone messages and that they would be lost in Luke's establishment. After accepting a drink and another dinner invitation Conrad drove back to his hotel.

# 3

LUKE acted with amazing rapidity. He called at noon to announce that he had made an appointment with Marvin Lurey for that afternoon. Conrad didn't need to be told that this would doubtless be the most important interview he would have no matter how long he stayed in Hollywood. He would rather have had a day's grace to rest after the cross-country trip—he had driven straight through with only two brief stops—but, on the whole, he was pleased that things were moving so fast.

Despite a city map which Conrad got from the hotel clerk he made several false turns before he reached the agent's Beverly Hills office. He found that streets in Los Angeles, which looked perfectly good on the map, tended to stop abruptly in a dead end or to shoot off crazily on a tangent. The small squat building he eventually found would, by its very lack of size, have indicated a shoestring operation in New York, but once inside Conrad felt himself on familiar ground. The walls were painted in that peculiar dark green which must have been especially mixed for advertising agencies, magazine publishers, and theatrical offices. Had he been in the first two occupations there might have been Toulouse-Lautrec prints on the walls, but in deference to his calling Marvin Lurey had hung three blown up glamour shots of Hollywood stars. Conrad walked up to the receptionist who smiled inquiringly at him.

'I'm Conrad Eldred,' he said. 'I have an appointment with Mr Lurey.'

The girl's smile broadened with relief as she digested the fact that he was not someone with whom she would have to 'cope'.

'Won't you sit down, Mr Eldred? I'll tell Mr Lurey you're here.'

Conrad settled into a rattan chaise-longue covered in the same green as the walls and enlivened by vivid red and yellow flowers. On a small table at his elbow were copies of the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety*, several days old. Conrad crossed his legs, careful of the crease in his trousers. A stand ash-tray raised the question of whether or not to smoke. He had no idea how long he would be made to wait, but past experience in identical offices told him that it might be anywhere from a minute to an hour. If he lit a cigarette now and was called in immediately, he would be unable to use that piece of business to carry him over any rough spot which might develop. He was on an interview.

The receptionist reappeared. 'Mr Lurey's on the phone right now. He asked me to tell you he won't be a minute.'

Conrad thanked her and the girl resumed her seat. He rose and walked to the water cooler. In New York nothing but a hole-in-the-wall agency would permit the *décor* of its office to be marred by the unsightly up-ended bottle squatting over a waste basket of crumpled cups. But, as Conrad later learned, the foot pedal or electric eye fountain so popular in Manhattan was impractical on the coast due to the brackish quality of Los Angeles water. He was refilling his cup for the second time, when a deep resonant voice boomed behind him.

'Conrad.' It was neither a question nor an exclamation, and its timbre and feeling saved it from being a plain statement of fact. Caught unaware Conrad turned

quickly, spilling a few drops of water on his shoe. Marvin Lurey stood in the doorway to his private office, beaming genially.

'Come on in,' he said.

Uncertain what to do with the water, which he had not wanted in the first place, and fighting an insane temptation to rub the toe of his shoe on the back of his trousers, Conrad stood clutching the flimsy paper cup. Lurey was a big man and the feeling of size was intensified by his stance, arms spread out and large well-kept hands resting on either door frame. The receptionist had risen when she saw her employer and for a second the three of them formed a tableau. Then Conrad hastily gulped the water and moved towards the office.

'Sorry about the phone,' Lurey said forcefully. 'But that's the way it is out here. That was an actress who called me up to ask me what I had done for her today. I told her I didn't have time to do anything for her, that I was too busy answering the phone. But it didn't faze her. How do you like this weather?'

Luke had been correct in his physical description of the agent. Marvin Lurey looked more like a motion picture star than anyone Conrad had yet seen in Hollywood and that, he thought with a grin, included Luke Barney. Indeed, there was something hauntingly familiar about the man until he realized that the agent affected the same style of dress as Cary Grant. His features were strong and regular and his black hair was wavy with just a touch of grey at the temples, as if it had been applied by a skilful make-up man. The only hint of his Semitic origin was a pair of luminous brown eyes which seemed much older and wiser than the rest of his face.

'Have a seat,' he said with a careless gesture of his arm.

Conrad lowered himself into a deep leather arm-chair.

The office was comfortable and, it seemed to Conrad, not at all 'Hollywood'. The dark stained walls, the business-like desk, and full bookcases reminded him of the library in a one-set mystery play. There were hunting prints on the walls. Marvin Lurey opened a cabinet behind the desk revealing a miniature bar.

'Would you like a drink?' the agent asked casually. After twenty-four hours at Luke Barney's pace there was nothing Conrad would have liked better, but he refused. He had seen how easy it was to be tagged as a lush, and how difficult to shake that reputation once acquired.

'No? Nor me.' Marvin Lurey snapped the cabinet shut and settled himself behind the polished desk. 'I don't drink myself. The only reason I asked you is because Luke Barney sent you to me. But that isn't fair, is it. Guilt by association. Luke's a fine actor. Have you known him long?'

'Almost twenty years. We used to work together before he——'

The phone interrupted him.

'You see what I mean?' The agent spread his hands level with his broad shoulders. He picked up the receiver. 'Hallo. Oh, Milt, hi, baby. Yeah, yeah, I saw it. It's a terrific picture for the budget — Okay, it's a terrific picture for *any* budget — Sure, sure, she was fine in the part, but how about the kid? That was a beautiful piece of acting he did. I think he ought to be doing bigger things — No, we left early. It isn't that I *want* to get up early in the morning. I got kids, what am I going to do? — Yeah — Yeah. Well, listen, I talked to that party you were interested in but I don't think you'll be able to get him for the figure you named -- Oh, no, it isn't. I checked with Max over at Paramount. He got three-five for his last picture — Look, baby, how long have you

known me? — Okay, but I don't think he'll do it — Look, Milt, why don't you call me tomorrow. Maybe I'll be able to think of something — Okay — and say, Milt, how about some golf this week? — Yeah, well you'd feel a lot healthier and have more money if you spent more time on the golf course and less at the track — Okay, baby, call me tomorrow, will you? — Yeah — Yeah — Bye-bye.'

Marvin Lurey replaced the receiver and made a brief note on his desk calendar. He flipped a switch on the office intercom and said:

'Doris.'

'Yes, Mr Lurey.' The girl's voice came back harshly strained through the mechanism.

'Don't put any more calls through for me unless they're really urgent.'

'Yes, Mr Lur——' His long manicured finger curtailed the reply.

'I'm sorry, Conrad. Maybe we'll get a minute to talk about you. Luke Barney speaks highly of your ability.'

Conrad shook out a cigarette. 'That's very kind of him.' He offered the pack to Lurey, who shook his head.

'I quit smoking. Plays hell with your wind. I might as well be frank with you, Conrad.' He tilted his hands in a contemplative triangle. 'You've never been out here before, have you?'

'No, I haven't.' Conrad crossed his legs in an effort to simulate an ease he was far from feeling. 'I haven't felt I was ready. Besides, Broadway's all through, it seems to me.'

Lurey nodded. 'Yes, I'm afraid you're right. They do fewer shows every year. I'm going to be frank with you. You picked the worst possible time to come out here. The studios are closing down right and left. Television is

really hurting the small neighbourhood exhibitors. There just isn't the work there was oh, even six months ago.' He waved a deprecatory hand. 'Sure, it's only a temporary slump, but it's a hell of a time to try to crash the industry.'

'But they're still making pictures. To make pictures they have to have actors.' Conrad pointed out.

The agent laughed sympathetically, as if touched by the other's naiveté. 'Have you been to Schwab's since you got to town? We've got actors, baby. We've got actors until they're running out of our ears. That's one commodity there'll never be a shortage of here.'

'I've always done all right,' Conrad said. 'I keep working even if I have to make the rounds to do it.'

'You don't make the rounds out here. If your agent can't get you work, you can be pretty sure you won't get much on your own. In a way it's an advantage. All you have to do is sit back and enjoy the sunshine while your representative does all the work for you. Suppose you tell me something about yourself, Conrad.'

This was the crucial moment. This was the time when he was expected to launch the craft of self-praise neatly trimmed with producers' names, playbill credits, and critical comments on the excellence of his performances. He knew that every actor who had preceded him into the office as well as all those who would follow must put on similar performances, this traditional glib recital he felt to be simple and meaningless. He was always glad when given something to read but some deep personal pride rebelled at office histrionics.

'I've been in show business for fifteen years,' he said simply. 'I've done a lot of stock and road shows and I have eight Broadway credits. Lately I've done quite a lot of television. As far as I know, everyone who has ever

hired me liked my work.' He smiled slightly. 'Maybe I should have brought my scrapbook.'

'I don't doubt that you can act, Conrad. I have a great deal of respect for Luke Barney's opinion. He's not the kind of guy who goes out on a limb even for a good friend. What do you do—mostly heavies?'

'Now, I do,' Conrad replied. 'I used to do comedy when I was a juvenile, but in television when I show up for rehearsal the prop man automatically hands me a gun.'

The agent doodled on a scrap of paper. 'I don't suppose you have any film on you?'

'I'm afraid not. Most New York TV is live. What there is left of it. Whenever they were doing a picture there I always seemed to be busy somewhere else.'

'You see my problem, don't you?' Lurey spread his hands. 'It's hard enough to sell actors when I can show some film with them in it. As a matter of fact, I've got two problems. I've already got actors under contract who play the same kind of roles you play. They've been around Hollywood for quite a while. The casting directors know them. It's easier for me to get them jobs, aside from the fact that it wouldn't be fair to send you for jobs they should get.'

Conrad sat silent. There was nothing to say in the face of this inexorable logic, yet he was reluctant to terminate the interview until the agent had refused him more definitely. He had not expected these difficulties, but he also felt that Lurey would not find them insurmountable if he made up his mind to handle him.

'These Broadway shows you mention——' The agent leaned forward. 'What were they?'

Conrad named them. The five flops, the two successes (having run for over a hundred performances they were so classified by Billboard) and the single solid hit in which

he had played the comedy juvenile before he left to go overseas with the USO. Lurey made another steeple with his hands and rested wise brown eyes on the actor's face.

'That's very easy to check,' he said softly. 'Everybody on the coast gets *Burns Mantle*.'

A wave of hot blood rushed to Conrad's cheeks. He stood up and ground out his cigarette in the ash-tray on the agent's desk, noticing as he did, a framed picture of two small children.

'Thank you very much for the interview, Mr Lurey,' he said when he could trust himself to speak. 'I'm sorry I took up so much of your time.'

He turned abruptly on his heel and walked out of the office, thanking the receptionist without breaking his stride.

Long bitter years in the grind of the theatre had taught Conrad the folly of banking on anything less substantial than a signed contract; nevertheless there was never an interview that did not begin in hope; now he was wretched as he considered the fiasco he had made of the meeting with Marvin Lurey. As he drove through the unfamiliar streets back to his hotel his anger at the agent's doubting his word about his experience gave way to dismay. His mind echoed the emphatic warnings he had received on every hand about the impossibility of working without an agent. And if he had made such a bad impression on Lurey what chance did he have with any of the others whom he would have to approach cold.

The unassailable fact remained that Conrad had in Luke Barney's word, 'goofed'. He had lost his temper and forgotten a cardinal rule of the theatre, that self-respect and honest individuality were luxuries which the actor seeking employment cannot afford. In this

unbelievably overcrowded field there were too many hopefuls eager to submit to unimagined mental, moral, and physical debasements in return for the privilege of walking before a camera or on to a stage. It was asinine to expect a man of Lurey's position to be impressed by a shamefaced mumbling of a few credits, followed by a *prima-donna* outburst of wounded vanity.

And so, Conrad thought grimly, there remained the dreariness of 'making the rounds'—the daily tramp from office to office to be rebuffed by receptionists or kept waiting while the director escaped through the back door. The gruff announcement that the show was all cast was often punctuated by voices of more fortunate actors in the next room who were even then in the process of trying out. False leads gave rise to false hopes. 'Come back next week, write for an appointment, we are using agents to cast this show—see one of them, I can't use you until I've seen your work.' All were stock answers. From the age of twenty Conrad had gone through this humiliating process of becoming 'known'. True, with each successive job the way had been easier but the years in which he had worn out shoes on the Broadway pavements had left scars on his personality time was not likely to erase.

At forty would he have the stamina to begin it all over again in a strange city? That he had behind him considerable Broadway experience—whether Lurey had believed it or not—would make little difference. Hollywood liked to discover its own Broadway actors rather than have them come knocking at the casting office doors. Also, if he was so much in demand in New York, there was no logical explanation for his presence in California without a contract or an agent to casually spread the word that he was 'in town looking around'.

Conrad was fourteen when he decided to become an actor. The Eldred family had gone to Washington to attend the first inauguration of President Roosevelt, as well as the swearing in of Conrad's uncle as a Congressional representative from Virginia. On the evening preceding that event there was an hysterical and festive feeling in the air at the end of the long Republican incumbency. This especially infected Conrad's father, Egon Eldred, who often declared he was a banker, but before he was a banker he was a Southern Democrat. Conrad's uncle, was giving a banquet for his supporters and well-wishers and, since he was a bachelor, Conrad's mother was acting as his hostess. So Egon took his son to a play at the National Theatre.

The audience was raucous and inattentive and an unusually high percentage of them had been drinking. They laughed in the wrong places, reading political significance into lines which had borne none in the writing. The actors were off and the performance was bad, but Conrad was enthralled. It was as if it could be *believed*, in a way he had not believed the movies since he was eight. The actors were tangible and the motives they expressed were real and familiar to him. The people on the stage were life-size and the things they were doing interested him.

The following evening, after squirming through an afternoon of interminable speeches, he sneaked away and spent the major portion of his pocket money to see the play again, though his father would have regarded this as wasteful. He was surprised to see that the performance was totally different from the preceding night. This being the first play he had ever seen, he could not know of the subtle relationship between live actors and their audience. He did not realize that each performer, in his

own fashion, had changed his performance to cope with the unique inaugural situation. One or two were openly hamming to get the unexpected election laughs, and the others had broadened their performances considerably in order to keep the audience with the play. Conrad felt as if he knew each of the actors personally, then realized with surprise that they had deliberately created living people and thrust them into his acquaintanceship. In the political jubilation which filled the car on the way home, no one noticed Conrad's silence. He had chosen his career

By the time Conrad had reached his hotel he was uncomfortably aware that a blue wool suit was not adapted to driving the Los Angeles streets in an open convertible. Although he had removed his jacket, the linen shirt clung heavily on his shoulders and his tie was choking him. It was only March but the fierce dry heat bounced off the regular patches of lawn as if they were hard bright emeralds. He found a parking place on Selma and walked back to the hotel, his jacket slung over his shoulder. At the desk he was handed his key and a folded telephone message, which he thrust in his pocket. Luke had probably called him about the interview but there would be time enough to tell the star of its ignominious end.

The elevator came to a stop on the ground floor and its Filipino pilot opened the door. Conrad stepped aside to let a youngish man and his wife out. She wore glasses with translucent frames and her stooped shoulders were revealed by an apron strap sunsuit. The husband wore a transparent shirt of one of the new plastics beneath which was clearly outlined his cotton gym-type undershirt. They made it plain in flat Midwestern accents that they

were on their way to see the footprints in the cement at the Chinese Theatre. Conrad smiled wryly as he himself felt a thrill at the well-known name.

When he had stripped and taken a warm shower reaction set in from the three-thousand-mile drive and the tension caused by his meetings with Luke and with the agent. He lay on the hotel bed too lethargic to move, too exhausted in mind and spirit even to consider rationally what his next step must be. The only brightness in his entire future seemed to lie in the warm sunlight which poured through the windows of his room. For perhaps an hour he lay there viewing the bands of sunshine with a personal interest so different from the detachment with which he had always regarded New York weather, an irritation to contend with or, if possible, ignore.

At length he decided that maybe his trip to Hollywood need not be the failure it seemed at the moment. At least he would not give up. He had made his own living from the time he left home—a good percentage of it in his chosen profession. He would try to make other contacts, and meanwhile, he might as well derive what benefit he could from the lazy semi-tropical life around him. He had always liked to swim and if he accomplished nothing more than to remove his grublike pallor it seemed reason enough for a trip to the beach.

He put on a pair of old trousers and a T-shirt, and, in the course of transferring his belongings from his suit pockets, came upon the phone message he had picked up earlier at the desk. Since no one but Luke knew where he was staying, Conrad had casually assumed the message to be from the star. Now, to his surprise, it said to call Marvin Lurey, and the time scribbled on the slip of paper indicated that the call was barely two hours old. It might

have been made *after* he had stormed out of the agent's office!

His lethargy suddenly vanished, he strode quickly over to the wall telephone.

'May I speak with the room clerk, please?' There was a moment's delay until the man at the desk answered in impersonal, unruffled tones.

'Yes?'

'This is Conrad Eldred. I picked up a phone message when I came in a little while ago from a Mr Lurey. Could you tell me when he called?'

'Doesn't it give the time on your message?'

'Well, yes, it does,' Conrad said. 'But I've just been talking to the man and I wondered if there couldn't be some mistake.'

'Hold the wire, please. I'll check with the operator.' The clerk's voice was icily polite.

Conrad waited, trying to control his impatience. Possibly the room clerk thought him a fool but he had to make sure if Lurey, for some reason he could not fathom, had actually called him back. It would certainly be more humiliating to call the agent after having stalked out of the office only to find that it was an earlier message to confirm the appointment he had already kept. The hotel man's carefully patient voice came back on the wire.

'I checked with the operator, Mr Eldred, and she remembers the call. It must have come just before you got it.'

'Thank you very much. I'm sorry I troubled you.'

Lurey *had* called again and while the operator was getting through to him the actor pondered this unexpected happening. Surely Marvin Lurey was too busy to waste his time in some childish attempt to get in the

last word, yet could the agent now want anything more to do with him on a professional basis? Even if he had somehow verified the Broadway credits, there were other actors in his files for roles such as Conrad might play. Maybe Luke Barney had called the agent and had renewed his request that Lurey do something for his friend, but this seemed nearly as far-fetched as the possibility that Conrad's temperamental outburst had impressed him as potential genius. Conrad knew that this reaction on the part of blasé talent-mongers was more apt to occur in rags-to-riches fiction than in real life.

'Marvin Lurey's office.'

'This is Conrad Eldred. I have a message here to call Mr Lurey.'

'Oh, yes, Mr Eldred.' The secretary's voice was breathily efficient. 'Mr Lurey's out of the office now, but he wanted me to ask you if you could meet him at the talent office of Excelsior Studios this afternoon at four?'

Though Conrad's heart was pumping he kept his tone calm. 'I guess I can. Did he say what it was for?'

'It's for a television show,' she replied, and mentioned one of the top ranking 'filmed crime shows. He said he would be there and, in answer to her question, said that he knew where it was, not wanting to be bothered with directions over the telephone.

Within an hour he was being passed through the studio gates by a uniformed officer. Notwithstanding his twenty years as an actor Conrad had never been on a movie lot and he was awed by the size of it. After the cramped dusty theatres and cubicle television studios of the east this miniature city which was Excelsior Pictures' home seemed gigantic. Streets were laid out over which cars and scenery trucks scurried in casual disobedience of traffic

signs posted about for their guidance. Sound stages, great barn-like structures painted a dismal brown and placed in careful lines like giant army barracks, dominated the scene. Scattered between them like weeds in a corn patch were various other conventional sized buildings which housed costumes, props, electric generators and writers.

Marvin Lurey was waiting for him in the casting office. The agent said nothing about his hasty exit that morning but explained rapidly that he had gotten a hurry up call for a gangster part and had thought Conrad might be willing to do it. He cut Conrad's thanks short and, with a nod to a second uniformed officer ushered the actor into an office off the corridor where he was introduced briefly to a man named Meyers, who gave him a quick head to toe appraisal and nodded.

'Yeah, he ought to be fine.' He turned to Conrad. 'We're shooting tomorrow morning at eight. Wear what you have on, no tie. Have you got a sport shirt?'

'Yes.' Conrad, accustomed to more elaborate interviews which involved readings and painfully prolonged decisions, did not quite realize that he already had the job.

'Wear it tomorrow, will you?' From the desk drawer Mr Meyers extracted a thin Manila bound script. He stood up and handed it to Conrad.

'There's your part.'

Somewhat dazed, Conrad stepped forward and shook his hand. 'Thank you very much, Mr Meyers. I'll try to do a good job for you.'

Meyers smiled briefly. 'I'm sure you will. Lurey's never given us a ringer yet, have you, Marv?'

The agent showed jovial teeth. 'Of course not, Al. How could I stay in business if I didn't have the very best?' He put a friendly arm around Conrad's shoulder as they

started for the door. 'Don't forget we've got a golf date this week-end.'

'You and your golf.' Meyers shook his head sadly from side to side. 'You're not satisfied with living off your commission, you've got to hustle your friends out of their hard earned money on the golf links.'

As they came out into the sun-filled parking lot Conrad was still bewildered at the rapidity of the interview. He was also uneasy about his unorthodox behaviour earlier in the agent's office, but he determined not to mention it as long as Lurey did not do so.

'Well,' Conrad said faintly. 'That certainly was quick.'

'How do you like the way we do things in Hollywood?' The agent's smoothly shaven face was wreathed in a self-satisfied smile.

Conrad smiled uncertainly. 'I don't see how you can beat it, although I can't help feeling it's not always that easy.'

'Pretty much.' Lurey replied. 'Out here the agent does the selling. You were already pre-sold before you ever saw Meyers. All he wanted was to see if you were the right size.'

'I'm very grateful to you for calling me, Mr Lurey.'

'Marvin will do. That's all right. When they get this show in the can I'll have some film on you and then we'll see what we can do from there.' He looked at his watch. 'I've got an appointment back in Beverly Hills so I'd better get rolling. Let me know how you make out.'

Conrad watched the agent as he strode briskly across the parking lot and got into a cream coloured Cadillac convertible. He started the engine and carefully adjusted a pair of air corps sun-glasses. He waved, first at Conrad and then at the policeman, as the powerful car surged through the gate.

# 4

THE actual filming of the TV show did not present as much difficulty as Conrad had anticipated. His experience in live television had prepared him for the cameras and sound booms although the long waits between infinitesimally short scenes were tiring. He found it tricky to sustain a characterization when the scenes were shot in bits and pieces, often out of their natural sequence. Although most of the actors on the set used mechanical teleprompters the director did not seem disturbed that Conrad had committed his part to memory. He spoiled only one take, which upset no one but himself, and when the shooting was over the director congratulated him and indicated that he might expect to work again. The entire filming took three days.

When he got his cheque Conrad invited Luke Barney out to dinner. They went to a steak house in the Valley and over the coffee the star waxed philosophic.

'You know, you're pretty damn lucky, Con. Can you imagine how often it happens that a guy comes to Hollywood and goes to work the first week he is here. It's a one in a million chance.'

'It's really because of you, Luke. I don't know how to tell you how grateful I am.'

'That's okay. All I did was send you in. Lurey must have taken to you or he wouldn't have sent you for the part.'

Rather sheepishly Conrad recounted the interview with the agent.

'So you're finally learning to be an office actor, huh,' Luke chortled. 'But it's a good thing you tried it on Lurey. Most of these other necktie salesmen around here don't have the sense enough to recognize real Broadway temperament when they see it.'

'It wasn't acting, Luke. I was really sore.'

'Yeah? Well, it doesn't matter. It was the best thing you could do with him providing of course, that your credits are on the up and up. But it looks as if you could stand a few home truths if you're going to get along in this town. Take this dinner——' He waved his hand across the table. 'You just got your cheque and you want to celebrate. You're going to pick up the tab and I'm going to let you because I look on it as commission and we are friends. How long do you think you can keep it up though?'

'Really, Luke, one lousy dinner. I've been eating at your place and drinking your booze practically every night since I got here.'

'That's just the point I want to make. *We're* friends. We roomed together and shared a can of beans. But money talks here. Talks? It screams at the top of its lungs. Don't live over your means, and for Christ sake, don't ever let anybody know you're broke. It's the worst, I mean the very worst. Somebody invites you to spend the week-end, don't make the mistake of going with the idea that you can cut corners on the dough. It's better not to go at all than to have anybody get the idea that you can't make the nut. If you're broke in New York, you're unlucky—or a Bohemian. If you're broke in Hollywood, you're a bum.'

'You sound like Polonius I'm not rolling in it, but I've been doing TV for the past four or five years and I've been putting a little in the bank. I saw the handwriting

on the wall and figured I might have to come out here. I paid cash for my car and I still have enough to last for a while. Anyway, I'm not crazy about night life and expensive socializing.'

'Okay, but just because you worked once don't get the idea that it's a steady thing. Lurey can't do much for you until that *Crime Busters* is released. Do you know when that's supposed to be?'

'He said some time in the fall.'

'That's what I mean. The first thing you ought to do is to move out of that hotel. I've got a spare bedroom if you want to stay with me.'

'No, Luke, I appreciate your asking but I think I had better stay by myself. Like you say I can't afford to keep a Hollywood pace, but I have enough to make it, providing I get an ordinary job and cheap room.'

Although he was moved by the star's offer to put him up, such a step would be plain foolhardy. Friends they might be, but Luke Barney moved in an entirely different world and it would do him more harm than good to get the reputation for being another of Luke's satellites. Besides, Conrad had always preferred his independence no matter how attractive the alternative might seem,

Conrad's first permanent home in Hollywood was a furnished room in a small house just south of Sunset Boulevard. The room was big, old fashioned and sunny. It had probably been designed to serve as a sewing room, and a small porch marked its private entrance to the street. An old-fashioned drop leaf desk augmented the usual furniture and there was a feather mattress on the bed. The walls were hung with framed mottoes extolling such old fashioned virtues as Home and Mother Love. The weekly rent was nine dollars.

Mr and Mrs Blakey were old, and middle westerners,

neither of which made them a rarity in Southern California. They were, however, older than anyone Conrad had ever known in his life before and their longevity fascinated him. Although Mr Blakey was eighty-eight and his wife was eighty-five they were extremely active. The house was neat as a pin and the lawn and grounds around it were always trim and orderly. They were part of the farm tradition, and although Mr Blakey had also been a railroad man, their hours coincided with those of the sun. Mr Blakey was hard of hearing and on two occasions his wife had literally forgotten when Conrad gave her the rent, but they were kindly decent people and they took a paternal interest in their roomer.

Conrad was especially taken with the indomitable spirit of Mr Blakey, who must have been a small man even before age withered and shrunk him. He had a large aquiline nose and snapping pale blue eyes embedded in a network of wrinkles when he laughed, which he did frequently. It was a familiar sight to see Mr Blakey clad in bib overalls with his shirt buttoned at the neck and a battered Panama hat to shelter him from the sun, stooped over the lawn, his knotty fingers jerking out Bermuda grass in righteous tugs. He was also a confirmed hoarder and judging from the bulging garage—the Blakeys no longer kept an automobile—he had never in his life thrown anything away.

Despite the long years they had lived and the many world-shaking events which had occurred during that span their stories of the past were dull and common-place. Their thoughts and conversation dwelled on the subject of death and this morbid preoccupation disturbed Conrad at first until he realized that it was the only thing they had left to look forward to. Their time sense was erratic. Mrs Blakey once told Conrad a long and

vivid story about a neighbour's little girl, who, at the age of twelve, was drowned. But as Conrad was racking his brain to place which of their neighbours it was he understood finally that the incident had taken place in Iowa just before the First World War. But they were kindly and left him alone.

Once settled in his room Conrad got a job. He had been wise, or fortunate, since it came about more or less by accident, to pick up a trade early in his career. Thus Conrad had, in a measure, been spared the constant financial stress which plagued so many of his fellow performers, during long periods without work in their own profession. He had seen them eking out unemployment insurance, living on sandwiches and doughnuts, waiting for the phone to ring. Even those who attempted to get jobs outside the profession learned to their dismay that they were unqualified to do anything and were no more than a drug on the labour market. Conrad, however, was a qualified bar-tender.

This was not to be expected, for since the memorable inaugural evening in Washington Conrad had never deviated from his desire to become an actor. His family, which had lived in Virginia from Revolutionary times, had consisted entirely of lawyers and bankers. Like many well-to-do families the Eldreds had not been prolific and, Egon's brother never having married, Conrad was the only male heir, and as such was expected to enter the family bank. Although Conrad firmly stated his intention of going on the stage and his trips to Washington and the National Theatre became so frequent as to cause comment in Hallsville, Egon Eldred regarded it as a phase through which his son was passing. He had faith in the ultimate efficacy of the family tradition together with a projected four years at Virginia Military Institute,

which he hoped would 'make a man of the boy'. When, remained uncooled, his father, possibly feeling that contact with the real thing might explode the bubble, arranged to have the boy spend a summer with the Washington branch of the Federal Theatre Project.

Egon's plan failed, however, for from the moment when he first trod the boards in a two-line part Conrad never looked back.

He stayed with the project for a year and, after a brief visit home, was off for the middle west where he was engaged by a small repertory company playing in grange and lodge halls. From there he joined one of the few remaining Mississippi showboats. Catchpenny companies such as the Folwell Players (Fun for the Whole Family) expected the performers to double in brass. In addition to portraying their parts they assumed the functions of stage-hands and electricians. They worked the streets with tickets and handbills, as well as running the front of the house. Ordinarily the front of the house consisted of little more than handling money and tickets, a responsibility most managers were reluctant to delegate, but on the showboat a good portion of the troupe's income was derived from a small bar rigged off the auditorium.

It became Conrad's duty to preside over this before and after each performance and it was a task which pleased him and for which he showed some aptitude. Although he was never called upon to mix fancy cocktails, he learned the rudiments of working behind a bar and of dealing with the peculiar type of custom which those establishments draw. Later, in New York, he joined the bartender's union, and had had many occasions since to congratulate himself on the trade he had acquired.

The L.A. local sent him on several prospective jobs and the one he finally chose was a night shift in The

Raven, a small neighbourhood bar within walking distance of his home. The manager, who was also the day bar-tender, was named Jack Ward. He was a type commonly seen working in resorts during the season, in fashionable cocktail lounges of hotels. He wore custom shirts with narrow collars, a meticulously trimmed black moustache, and an expression which intimated that nothing he saw would surprise him, he had seen it all. He was about fifty with neat rather small hands. And, like some of his *confrères* whose work follows the sun, he scrupulously avoided it so that his skin was unnaturally pale and sallow. His incongruous presence in a working-class bar like The Raven was due to his being discovered while working in the paddock club of one of the local race-tracks, by the Raven's owner, who had taken a fancy to him and had given him a percentage for managing it.

Jack had been a bootlegger during prohibition and still fancied himself as something of a hoodlum. He was always telling complex stories of New York and Chicago gangs, which were peppered with obscure Italian names. He affected a somewhat *passé* gangster slang as he recalled the long-forgotten hi-jackings and internecine wars with cut scotch and bathtub gin. Conrad was to be the only night man except for Saturday nights, when there was what Jack called 'action'. When he learned that Conrad had come out from New York the manager warmed to him as someone who might share his monumental contempt for California.

'It's the world's biggest oasis,' Jack said, mopping the bar dourly. He seldom smiled, his sense of humour running to the sardonic. 'I've been behind the stick all over the country but I never thought I'd wind up stuck in a hole like this.'

'Well, you have to admit the weather's wonderful,' Conrad said.

'So who needs it? What good's the sunshine if you got to split it with two million farmers?'

Conrad soon noticed, however, that Jack Ward was at heart a sentimentalist. He was always good for a touch by the regular patrons of The Raven and was genuinely distressed when any of them got into trouble. He would listen sympathetically to long recitals of frustrated love affairs or overburdening financial worries. He had gone bail for patrons on several occasions and he had a drawer full of bad cheques and unpaid bar bills. He gambled and drank a great deal and had little respect for the law, but within his own code he was a generous and staunch friend. He believed that bars had a definite tradition and took the same pride in his occupation as a sculptor or doctor.

'Whatever made you come out to this crummy dump?' he asked Conrad one day.

'I like to travel. I'd never been here before, so I thought I'd take a look at it.'

Conrad had not mentioned that he was an actor for several reasons. First, he knew the actor's often undeserved reputation for instability. Besides, he was not actually in the movies, at least until autumn, and there were thousands of phonies all over town who boasted about their movie exploits. Even in the short time he had been in Hollywood he had been struck by the frequency with which everyone dropped motion picture names in a strange casual awe. And, he felt, were the word to get out with the customers it would dissipate the moral authority without which a bar-tender cannot do his job.

Working in the Raven was a pleasure, for the customers were friendly and quiet. There was no juke box but there were several *habitués* who played the piano with varying

degrees of efficiency. His work went well for he liked people and, since from his acting training he had learned to study them with unemotional detachment, he was soon a fixture in the bar. He got on well with Jack Ward to judge by the increased virulence of the manager's playful insults, and on the few occasions when the owner came around he, too, seemed satisfied with the new man.

In his off time Conrad enjoyed a sense of freedom which was new to him. It was of no avail in Hollywood to tramp from office to office in search of parts. Marvin Lurey was supposedly guiding his career and had said there was nothing to be done until the *Crime Busters* film was released, and he could take it around to the casting directors in the major studios. In the meantime he could work a full-time job without fear that his prolonged absence from the theatrical offices would result in his being forgotten. He was, in fact, totally unknown.

Conrad's room was a short two blocks from a small park where he adopted the California custom of sun-bathing. Most parks have their own peculiar character and Delongpre Park was a rendezvous for gamesters. Elderly, eccentric-looking men came from all over the city carrying chess boards under their arms or clutching decks of worn cards. Almost all of them gambled and although the stakes were small the games were bitterly contested. They played on benches and picnic tables and sometimes on the grass, although most of them sought the shade. In addition to chess the favourites were gin rummy, pinochle and occasionally bridge. Once in a while Conrad joined or kibitzed silently, but most of the time he was content to lie in the sun, reading plays and movie scripts from the public library or marvelling all the while at the relaxed tempo of life in California.

In this park Conrad found a memorial to Rudolph

Valentino. It pleased him to see a lasting tribute to an actor and he wondered if this might not be the only one of its kind in the world. Will Rogers, of course, had achieved a great deal of permanent recognition but he became more of a public figure than an entertainer. There could be no doubt that Valentino's only achievement had been theatrical. It was not a statue, except in a pre-Mycenaic sense, but rather a round piece of black marble about the size of a medicine ball set upon a squat black pedestal surrounded by scraggly shrubbery. There was a carved inscription.

## ASPIRATION

Erected in the memory of

RUDOLPH VALENTINO

Presented by his friends and admirers from every walk of life—in all parts of the world—in appreciation of the happiness brought to them by his cinema portrayals.

Some time later he learned that a gilt figurine of the screen idol had been stolen from atop the ball shortly after the memorial was erected.

As spring merged into early summer Conrad tried to discover the new city in which he lived. He liked to drive to different sections, park his car and make walking inspection tours. Although more than two million people reside in the Los Angeles area—and area was certainly the right word, he had never been in a city so vast geographically—he got the flavour of a very small town. Whether it was because so many residents owned or

rented homes or because so many had originally come from small communities bringing their provincialism with them, Los Angeles had more in common with the small Virginia town in which he had been raised than a major metropolis. Even Norfolk had seemed cosmopolitan to him.

The manifestations of this rural spirit were apparent even in the sounds—birds chirping, lawn mowers whirling, and the town whistle which blew regularly at noon. The single urban noise was the constant scream of police, fire and ambulance sirens and this was overdone, as if by children playing cops and robbers. On one occasion when Conrad heard this banshee wail behind him and pulled over to let the official vehical pass it had proved to be a maintenance truck for one of the street car lines swerving importantly through the massed waiting traffic.

Los Angeles was a city on wheels. The car owner—and practically everybody was one—in addition to being forced to maintain a costly piece of equipment, was also possessor of a clear cut social barometer. Everyone was familiar with the cost of all makes and models and the owner's position in society was assessed on this basis. It didn't seem to matter whether the car was paid for or not, to drive it presupposed to own it, and the Dodges spoke only to the Caddies while the Caddies spoke only to God.

Strangers talked to one another more readily here and an aggressive neighbourliness was the rule. The topics of conversation were seldom illuminating, being confined mostly to lengthy discussions of the weather, the rapid growth of Los Angeles, and the relative performance of various automobiles. Everyone seemed to have come from some place else but the common social arbiter was the length of one's residence in California. Ten-year veterans

reminisced with the comprehensive authority of oldest inhabitants and even those of one-year standing wished wistfully for the 'good old days before the town got so crowded'.

Having been to Latin America Conrad had little trouble with the place names which were mostly of Spanish derivation and were spoken in loose approximation of the original pronunciation. California was pugnaciously proud of its Mexican heritage and the missions and other relics of the early Spanish days were assiduously maintained. The current Mexican population, however, was not looked upon with the same solicitude. They were commonly called 'wetbacks' and like the orientals were for the most part restricted to menial employment. A sight to which Conrad soon became accustomed was the Filipino or Japanese gardener who wore a uniform like a jungle guerilla fighter complete with pith helmet and pruning shears strapped to his side like a sword.

Hollywood itself was a different movie capital from the one depicted in its frequent motion pictures about itself. The night-clubs on the Sunset Strip with their garish *décor* and outrageous prices were virtually indistinguishable from their counterparts in New York or Paris, but the flashy Coney Island aspect of Hollywood Boulevard intrigued him. Nowhere was the influence of the motion picture upon the small American community more apparent than on this main artery, and its users dressed like reigning cinema greats from hairstyles to cheap copies of their wardrobe. But what was not imitation was cultivated eccentricity. Flagrant sex deviates strolled the Boulevard hand in hand, unremarked by all but the most obvious tourist. Men's clothing ranged from cowboy boots to tuxedos in the afternoon, and there seemed as little pattern to the women's costume, unless

it was the exposure of as much bare skin as possible. A barefoot man with a beard and long flowing hair was no rarer sight than a sunburnt woman in a bathing suit carrying her washing to the laundromat in a golf bag.

Life in Luke Barney's *milieu* was more like he had imagined the cinema capital to be from his reading. There were yachting trips to Catalina with luscious starlets in the crew, midnight autocaravans to isolated bits of California coast, and the inevitable swimming pool parties. Although Luke was as friendly and unassuming as he had always been Conrad did not feel really a part of these gatherings. Besides, the star was now in the throes of a new picture and with Conrad's night shift they saw comparatively little of each other.

One day while walking down Hollywood Boulevard a man accosted Conrad and slapped him on the shoulder.

'Conrad Eldred!'

Conrad turned to see a medium-sized man of perhaps sixty whose white hair, though thinning at the top, was worn in a long fall at the back. He had a trim white moustache and the stiff unnatural carriage of the head, remnants of the days when leading men were called *matinée* idols. His name was Mennen Gilchrist and Conrad knew him well, having spent six continuous months in his society while touring Europe with the USO.

'Well hi, Mennen. I heard you were out here but I didn't know where to get in touch with you.'

"Oh, yes, I've been here for some time now. How long have you been in our fair metropolis?' Gilchrist's voice was deep and his diction manneristic and pseudo-English. He pronounced 'been' with a long E and he put the words 'fair metropolis' in quotes to indicate humour. Conrad remembered how annoying this trick had been during their USO tour.

'Almost two months. I drove out from New York.'

'Ah, New York!' Gilchrist sighed. 'It's highly unlikely that I shall return. I've been here over three years. Isn't the weather extraordinary?'

'Yeah, it's great.'

'Conrad, my boy, it's like a ghost from the past to see you. Are you——' His tone became elaborately casual. 'Are you out here under contract?'

'No,' Conrad replied truthfully 'I just came out to look around.'

'I see.' There was relief in the character man's voice and as he went on a rising note of condescension was evident. 'It's rather an unfortunate time to arrive, my lad. The industry is in quite a shaky state at present. Of course, I'm doing quite well. I just finished a picture at Fox and I've had an offer to make another one at Columbia but my agent won't let me take it. Salary's much too small. It doesn't pay to let them cut your salary out here, my boy. Of course, I have had no trouble obtaining work. There are so few here with least modicum of legitimate stage training Dreadful bunch of hams.'

'I'm glad you're doing well.' Conrad had to smile. The older man's attitude was fairly common among actors, young or old. Nowhere does misery love company so much as in the overcrowded acting profession. When an unemployed actor hears of another working he can't help feeling that it is a job he might just as well have had. It is useless to talk of disparate types, for it is a rare performer who does not secretly believe he can play any part which has ever been written from Hamlet to Aaron Slick of Punkin Crick. Anyway, not even Gilchrist's airy boasting could conceal the tell-tale frayed spot in his coat sleeve.

'How about a little drink for old times' sake,' Conrad

said. 'That is, unless you've made some changes since the USO.'

'None except those wrought by the gaunt man with the scythe,' Gilchrist replied in his humorous quoting style. 'But I—I don't have my car right now. I had to put the bloody thing in the garage, valves, or something.'

'That's okay, we'll take mine. It's parked a couple of blocks away.' They turned off the Boulevard and walked to the side street.

Conrad remembered he had been out of the navy for almost a year when the peace was signed in Europe. It was then decided that stronger measures were necessary to bolster the morale of war-weary GIs who would be restless during a dreary period of occupation. Danger was no longer a factor and Special Services demanded more than the second-rate comic and girl accordion player who, because of their easy mobility, had been standard fare for 'the boys' during the war. The USO responded by mounting well equipped productions of tried and true plays and musicals and shipping them abroad where they played in legitimate theatres in the division centres.

At the time of this increased activity *Candle* by *Candle* had been playing for seven months on Broadway and seemed indicated for a run of at least another year. Conrad was tired of his part and wanderlust stirred in his veins. The USO only paid a hundred dollars a week with all the aggravation of going on the road multiplied a thousand times. But they had no trouble in casting their plays. The office was as full of aspirants as that of any Broadway producer but the small salary added to the performer's agreement to absent himself from New York for six months at the height of the season made an actor currently on Broadway in demand. Since he did not have

a run of the play contract, he gave his notice and signed with one of the USO companies. Luke, who was out of work at the time, had told him he was crazy and that he would be forgotten in six months' time.

They had rehearsed the play, a fast-paced comedy, for a month and after a tryout at one of the near-by army bases were issued uniforms and shipped to Italy. Conrad alone of the fourteen, including a New York stage-hand to supervise the GI crews, had been in the service. The 'hurry up and wait' procedure was no different in the army but it played havoc with a number of egocentric stage personalities. The spirit of high adventure which had welded the company together in the early stages had worn thin by the time the troupe reached Naples. Definite alliances had been formed and rancorous feuds were continually breaking out over such matters as quarters and transportation.

When the unit had reached France half the cast were not on speaking terms and frustrated temperament was seeking its way. There was drinking, and black marketing. Some consorted only with officers while others were exclusively loyal to the enlisted men. Two of the girls were providing entertainment for the GIs not specified in their original contracts. The play itself had become a shambles since the soldiers, though a good audience, were in many respects very uncritical and could see nothing amiss in a pratfall as long as it brought a laugh. The trouble and expense entailed in firing an actor and replacing him was so great that nothing as minor as a slipshod performance was sufficient cause for action, even had there been a director there to notice and report it.

Through it all Mennen Gilchrist had played the grand old man of the theatre, selling shoes and cigarettes, and getting very drunk in the field grade officers' clubs. He

was the life of the party, regaling generals and chicken colonels with intimate stories of the love life of Margaret Anglin, Pauline Lord, and other names which made no impression on his hearers, who wanted a few snappy jokes about Mae West. In Berlin a performance was cancelled because two actors, one of them being Gilchrist, were too drunk to go on even if they could have found the *ingénue* last seen heading towards the *autobahn* in a jeep with a first-lieutenant.

Conrad had been sure when the company disbanded that each member of the unit had made himself thirteen lifelong enemies, but on meeting several of his fellow players later in New York the rancour and enmity was as if it had never been, and the whole tour took on an aspect of rosy reminiscence. The trip had been an invigorating and enlightening experience for Conrad, one which he was glad to have enjoyed despite the fact that his room mate had been right in his prediction that another job would not be so easy to come by. Through the haze of cognac, chocolate bar assignation, and back-biting professional jealousy Conrad had perceived a further insight into the way people function in crises, to say nothing of a view of the military mind he could never have got in a lifetime as a navy enlisted man.

Mennen Gilchrist ran an appraising eye over Conrad's automobile as he got in.

'How do you like the Buick, my boy?

'It ran fine coming out here. Of course the damn thing eats a lot of gas. Look, since I'm practically a stranger here why don't you suggest where to go.' Conrad had no intention of taking him to The Raven where his ham mannerisms would be an unwelcome give-away.

The character man cleared his throat importantly. 'Well, my boy, it's rather early in the afternoon for any of

my regular haunts, but they have a nice little bar in the Roosevelt Hotel—perhaps we might go there.'

An attendant parked the car and they entered a large cocktail lounge with dim lights and blue mirrors. They stood for a moment blinking to accustom their eyes to the sudden darkness before Gilchrist waved imperiously to the cocktail hostess. She showed them to a table which Gilchrist declined, pointing to one in the centre of the room which commanded a view of the entire lounge. When they were finally seated Conrad and the old actor caught each other up on the various members of their USO unit. None had achieved signal success, in fact over half of them had dropped out of the theatre entirely. Through two more martinis Mennen Gilchrist told fanciful tales of the movie industry, mentioning a number of directors and producers by their first names. Finally, more from politeness than because he was really interested, he asked Conrad what he had been doing. He mentioned the crime television film, adding that his agent had said there was nothing he could do until the film was released.

'Quite right,' Gilchrist concurred. 'Can't sell you if he doesn't have anything to sell. Miserable commercial proposition. Who is your agent, my boy?'

'Marvin Lurey.' Conrad was pleased to see a look of respect in the character man's eyes as he registered the name.

'Lurey. Yes. Yes, he's very good. His connexions are especially good at Excelsior.'

This was Luke Barney's studio and Conrad thought for a minute of mentioning his friendship with the star, but decided to leave the name-dropping to Gilchrist.

'An agent is very important out here, my boy.' The character man went on pontifically. 'Once you have

signed with one let him handle your career. Do not make the mistake of going behind his back in search of parts yourself. No matter what anyone might tell you agents have the power of life or death here. If one of them ever puts you on the black list you might as well go back to New York. You'll never again get past the special policeman at the studio gate.'

They had another drink and Conrad called for the cheque. Mennen Gilchrist made a broad gesture towards the inside of his jacket.

'I'll get it, Mennen. Catch me next time.'

'Nonsense,' the older actor completed the gesture and his eyes widened in surprise. He gave an embarrassed smile. 'I say. Well, I'm afraid I shall have to acquiesce. I seem to have left my billfold in one of my other suits. Bloody stupid trick.'

Conrad remembered the frayed cuff.

'It can happen to anybody,' he said easily. 'Why don't you let me lend you five—so you won't have to go home right away.'

A faint reddish tint suffused the smoothly shaven cheeks of the older man as he accepted the five dollar bill. 'That's very decent of you, Conrad. I have some shopping to do on the Boulevard. It *would* be a nuisance to go home—that is, since I don't have my car right now. We must get together for dinner. I'm in the book, you know.'

They parted on the corner with mutual assurance that they must get together soon. Conrad watched the man as he strode down the street, head held high and back unnaturally erect. Phony as they were, Conrad liked the society of his fellow actors. But if Mennen Gilchrist had asked instead of acted he could have had ten.

# 5

AMONG the peculiar Southern California phenomena are the ranch markets, so titled because they allegedly buy vegetables and dairy products direct from the farmer. But in addition to acting as grocer they also function as drug store, liquor store, news stand, counter lunch and general centre for the people in their vicinity. There is one of these institutions on Vine Street and this too was a slice of Hollywood unmentioned in the books. Extras and bit players mingled with steel-helmeted aircraft workers just off the swing shift. Unshaven truck drivers rubbed elbows with hard-faced, over made-up party girls stopping in the grocery section to buy their can of frozen orange juice and container of cottage cheese.

The ranch market was open twenty-four hours a day but it was the period right after the bars had closed when the open air lunch counter did its biggest business. It became the final refuge of foot-loose men who had no place to go but home and preferred the crowded, coffee-stained counter to the bleak despair of a furnished room. There they dawdled, commenting upon the passing girls like teenagers in front of the corner drug store or casting envious eyes at the stream of cars pouring into the adjacent parking lot. Some of the faces grew familiar to Conrad as he saw them nightly assume their customary positions with a proprietary air, surveying the passing shoppers like experienced hosts anxious that all the guests were having a good time.

One particularly busy Friday night there were three

men in their early twenties at the counter drinking coffee and talking, their voices strident above the usual hum of conversation. It was obvious that they had had a great deal more to drink than was good for them. If they had been customers of The Raven they would have been shut off long before their present stage of intoxication, but not all the bars in the city were as careful about the Board of Equalization rules as Jack Ward. They had cleared off a considerable portion of the counter and were noisily engaged in India wrestling, a farcical exhibition as one of the participants in particular was having enough trouble maintaining his equilibrium. In fact just as his wrist was being forced down on the counter he lost his balance entirely and stumbled back on to the sidewalk. Before his friends could catch him he crashed full force into a wire cart of groceries which a young girl was wheeling towards the parking lot. The cart tumbled, the paper sacks split with the impact, and cans and loose fruit rolled in riotous confusion.

'You bastard!' the girl flung over her shoulder, stooping to gather the scattered groceries from the sidewalk and gutter.

The youth who had upset the cart dusted his clothing and reeled over to the kerb, but instead of helping the girl with the spilled food he grabbed her roughly by the shoulder and said in a high nasal southern whine:

'Don't you lay your tongue to me, girl.'

The girl shook his hand off her shoulder and, paying no further attention, attempted to gather the remains of her stores, but the man continued with drunken persistence to demand an apology. By this time a small crowd had gathered to watch the contretemps and when Conrad saw that no one else seemed inclined to interfere he stepped forward.

**'Look, bud,' he said mildly. 'Why don't you let the girl pick up her stuff. After all, you're the one who knocked it over.'**

**'You keep out of it, you stupid bastard.'**

Conrad shot a left to the head and buried his right up to the wrist in the man's stomach. His head shot forward, a wild mop of blond hair flying, and suddenly he sat down in the gutter, retching. One of the fallen man's comrades leaped at Conrad's back. The actor dropped quickly to one knee and lowered his head. The momentum of the assailant's attack pitched him over and he lit on his hands and knees on the sidewalk. Conrad rose quickly to his feet looking for the third man, but as fast as the fight had started it was over, the man he had hit in the stomach disappeared in the crowd aided by his two comrades. Conrad helped the girl gather up the remaining cans. As she stood up he saw that she was young and rather attractive, although her hair was in wild disarray and her face twisted with rage and humiliation

**'Well, thanks a lot, Galahad.' Her tone was facetious in a visible effort to keep control.**

Conrad finished loading the remaining cans and boxes in the little cart. A container of milk had burst and the gutter was being rapidly filled with its contents. He indicated the spreading white puddle.

**'Looks like you're going to have to eat your cereal dry tomorrow.'**

**'I can always get more milk,' she said, her voice more calm. 'Damn hoodlums!'**

**'Well, they were pretty drunk. Don't let it bother you. Have you a car?'**

**'Yes, it's parked in the lot.' She took the handle of the grocery cart and started to wheel.**

**'Maybe I better go along with you,' Conrad said. 'I**

don't really think you'll have any more trouble with them, but it's pretty dark back there. No use taking chances.'

She hesitated a moment.

'Well, okay. It's very nice of you to take all this trouble.'

'No trouble at all.' Conrad took the cart and wheeled it back to the parking lot. The girl pointed to a battered pre-war Ford coupé painted a bright red. Conrad opened the door and began to transfer the groceries on to the seat. Suddenly he stopped. There was something not quite right about the car and for an instant he could not think what it was. Then he realized that it somehow seemed lower to the ground than it should. Every tyre on the car was flat.

'Oh-oh'

'Damn them!'

'Yeah, they must have done it all right. It isn't reasonable to suppose you'd get four flats all at once. What I don't understand is how they knew it was your car.'

The girl bit her lips, barely able to fight back her tears. 'They must have seen me in it. I come here all the time. And it isn't as if the car was conspicuous or anything,' she added wryly.

Conrad looked at the gleaming red paint and had to smile in spite of himself.

'It isn't as funny as all that. I don't have the money to buy four new tyres.'

'Oh, I don't think you have to worry about that. They wouldn't have had time to cut them. It's harder than you think to cut that rubber. They probably just let the air out.'

He stooped by the right front wheel and removed a broken match-stick from the valve stem.

'See,' he said, holding it out for her. 'They just stuck these in and beat it. It's an old trick.'

'It's a *dirty* trick.'

'Well, I'd suggest you load your stuff in my car and let me take you home. You can come back in the morning with somebody who has a hand pump and blow them up enough to get to a service station.'

'And leave the car here?' She shook her head vigorously. Conrad noticed that she had natural brown hair, curly with golden highlights bleached in by the sun.

'I don't think they'll come back,' Conrad reassured her. 'After all, they know you've discovered it by now. For all they know you might have called a cop.'

The girl agreed and Conrad loaded the groceries into his Buick. She lived near the ranch market in an apartment which she shared with another girl. She refused his offer to help her in with the bundles but asked him if he would mind waiting until she had put everything inside and then drive her to an all-night service station.

'I can't help but be worried about the car and besides if I stay in now I'll have to explain the whole thing to my room mate and I couldn't trust myself to do that until I feel a little calmer about it myself. You've been so kind I hate to impose on you any more but—well, if you don't have anything to do I'd really appreciate it.'

'Okay,' he said. 'But I don't know what you're going to do about a hand pump. Those things went out with button shoes.'

'We'll do something. I'll be out in a jiffy.'

To Conrad's surprise when the girl reappeared she had changed from her rather nondescript sweater and skirt to a dark green dress, which, as nearly as Conrad could tell from the uncertain glow of his dashboard, matched her eyes.

'What did you do?' he asked. 'Put on your service station clothes?'

'My room mate started to ask a lot of questions so I told her I had a date waiting. It wouldn't have looked right to go out on a date without changing.'

They drove back to the ranch market where the Ford was as they had left it. Conrad suggested a cup of coffee before they searched for a hand pump. The girl agreed, but said she would prefer to go somewhere else to have it.

'I feel so conspicuous. After what happened and everything.'

'I thought you were worried about the car?'

'I was but nothing's happened to it. Besides, you said it would be all right.'

They drove to an all-night coffee shop on the Boulevard. Seeing the girl for the first time in good light Conrad found her even more attractive than he had at first thought. Not that she was beautiful in the normal Hollywood sense. Her nose was too snub and her features had life and piquancy rather than the monotonous perfection common to pictures. Her hair, worn longer than the current style, was luxuriantly careless in a way which put one at his ease. She wore no make-up save lipstick with which she had faithfully followed the natural curve of a generous mouth. Her forehead was high, and her eyebrows full and even. Now that she was more relaxed she had a quick impish smile which showed clean regular teeth. Her figure, as revealed by the green dress, was superb. But her most compelling feature were large deep green eyes which reminded Conrad of the Mediterranean just as the sun was going down.

'It suddenly occurs to me,' he said, 'that I don't even know your name.'

'Joyce It's from the Latin. It means sportive. And if

you don't know what sportive means you better look it up.'

Conrad laughed. 'I know what it means. At least, I know it doesn't mean what you thought I thought it meant—or something.'

There was a pause

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Aren't you going to tell me your name?'

'Conrad Eldred. Born in Hallsville, Virginia. Late of New York.'

'How long have you been out here?'

'About three months.'

'Like it?'

'Sure.'

They sat for a moment in silence then Joyce leaned towards him, her smooth brow wrinkled slightly.

'Look, Conrad, I don't know exactly how to say it. I guess in the old days when knighthood was in flower the girls always had pretty little speeches ready when they were saved from dragons. These days a girl doesn't get much occasion to use them. All I want to say is that I'm grateful——' There was a twinkle in the green eyes. 'And I might add, a little astounded'

'You weren't as astounded as I was. I could count the number of rough houses I've been in on the fingers of one hand.'

'Well, from where I sat you did pretty well for an amateur.'

'What do you say we skip it,' Conrad said with embarrassment. 'As far as I'm concerned fighting is far and away the most stupid thing a man can do. I'm not in the least proud of myself.'

'Okay. Sorry. What shall we talk about now?'

Conrad grinned. 'I guess that's my cue to say—your hopes, your dreams, your telephone number.'

'I have no hopes, I never remember my dreams, and my telephone number is in the book.'

'Under Joyce?'

'Under Joyce Rayner. Born in Hollywood. Late of Hollywood. Still in Hollywood.'

'Nobody's born in Hollywood.'

'No kidding, I really was,' she replied. 'I went to Hollywood High School. I kept on going there even after my mother moved to the valley. She wanted me to be a movie star and she thought that was the best place to be discovered.'

'Didn't it happen?'

The girl spread her arms and shrugged. 'Look at me. What do you think?'

'I have been looking at you I think you're very attractive.'

'It's nice of you to say it, but I'm afraid you and my mother wouldn't agree. She thinks I'm as ugly as sin. It's one of the big disappointments of her life, but it doesn't matter to me. I couldn't think of anything I'd less rather be than a movie star.'

Conrad chuckled. 'That must make you almost unique. I never thought I'd live to hear a girl say that.'

'Oh well, you've heard one now. I've lived here all my life, most of it in theatrical boarding houses. There's nothing you could tell me about Hollywood that I don't know. I'd never want to live anywhere else, and, fortunately, there's room in the town even for people who aren't in the picture business. I can't stand the picture business. Especially actors—God, how I hate actors.'

Joyce was working as a car hop in one of the larger drive-ins

'I don't care much for the job,' she said. 'But the money's nice. I can make my hundred every week if I get out and work for it and I'd like you to tell me any other job where they pay women that kind of money.'

'It's pretty hard work though, isn't it?' Conrad asked.

'Just ducking passes. It's no harder than any other waitress job. Besides, I don't look frail to you, do I?'

'No, you don't, but it isn't any fun being on your feet for eight straight hours. I ought to know. I'm a bar-tender myself.'

'You are?' Joyce asked with interest. 'Where do you work?'

'The Raven. Have you ever been in there?'

'No. But that's not surprising. I don't go to bars much. My room mate practically lives in them. I'll have to ask her when I get home if she's ever been in yours.' She gave him an elfish smile. 'I'll get all the low down from her. Bar-tenders are her strong suit. She always knows them wherever she goes.'

Joyce drained her coffee cup and crushed her cigarette in the saucer. 'Much as I enjoy all this, I think we'd better get the show on the road.'

'For a gal who doesn't want to be a movie star as bad as you, it seems to me you use an awful lot of show business slang.'

She stood up, smoothing her dress on her hips. 'You stay around here for a while and see if you don't pick it up too.'

When they got in the car Joyce turned to him somewhat helplessly, waiting for him to outline a strategy for inflating the tyres. Conrad, in his preoccupation with the girl herself, almost overlooked what might prove to be the simplest solution to her dilemma. Then he hit his forehead with the heel of his hand.

'Don't forget me when they hand out the leather medals,' he said. 'It just dawned on me that I know a very likely place to find a hand pump without going on an extended tour of service stations.'

'Where?'

'In my garage.'

'Well, fancy that,' Joyce replied ironically. 'Where do I wait while you're getting it—in the master bedroom?'

Conrad's face froze.

'The master bedroom is the only bedroom. And the bedroom is the whole house—at least my part of it. I'm not at all sure that the landlord would be overjoyed if I had you wait there so, if it won't break your heart, I'm afraid you'll have to wait in the car.'

He explained curtly about his room and his elderly landlord's penchant for saving things and then drove rapidly to his home, his irritation reflected in his jumpy driving. The girl sat silently beside him, a quizzical expression in her large green eyes. As they pulled into the driveway Conrad cut the lights, pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment and got out of the car.

'Wait here—that is, if you're sure you're safe,' he snapped and disappeared into the garage.

He cast the beam over the piles of tools, as he fumbled around in the dark, barking his shins on pieces of protruding metal, he became more and more irked by the girl's ready assumption that he was taking advantage of her predicament to seduce her. He liked Joyce and it was annoying that she thought him capable of such a shoddy stratagem. All right, he found her attractive but if he ever slept with her it would be a result of mutual agreement arrived at in an adult fashion. Luke and others often laughed at him, but it had always been a point of

pride that he had never tricked a woman into bed with him.

He must have searched fifteen minutes before his faith in Mr Blakey's saving instincts was rewarded and he pulled from behind a box of plumbing fittings a rusty hand pump. He moved the handle up and down testing the pressure and, satisfied, returned to the car. He slid into the driver's seat and without a word started the engine.

'I was beginning to think you'd died in there,' the girl said. 'How did you make out?'

'I found one,' he answered shortly.

They drove back to the ranch market. In a deepening silence Conrad blew up the tyres on the red Ford. He tossed the pump into the trunk of his own car.

'That ought to get you to a service station, but you'd better get the guy there to put more air in them.'

'Conrad,' Joyce started, an almost apologetic note in her voice. 'I don't know how to thank you for all you've done. I——'

'Glad I was able to help,' he cut in brusquely. 'Be seeing you.'

He let out the clutch and the Buick shot forward with a squeal of tyres. As he turned into the drive of his home there was a deep red glow over the house-tops to the east. It was going to be another sunny day.

# 6

**DURING** summer Conrad found himself on even more intimate terms with Luke than when they roomed together in New York. As one who had known Luke before his rise to prominence his status in the star's household was that of old and cherished friend. Luke's picture was finished and they were now able to sail in the ketch, swim at the beach, or take long drives to various outlying communities of the sprawling city. On Conrad's night off Luke occasionally had a few friends—and an appropriate number of girls—in for drinks, but since neither cared very much for parties more often they had dinner alone, served on a coffee table in front of the open fireplace.

Luke still loved the stage. He never tired of reminiscient talks about the old days and lengthy discussions of current happenings in New York. He knew more about plays being done in the east than Conrad who, in his new environment, had gradually let New York and the world of the legitimate theatre slip into a hazy, ill remembered dream. Although both were good actors Conrad had never had his friend's determination and drive. Luke had ignored the long odds against success. He had charted a course of action very early in life and held to it without deviation. Neither a great social upheaval nor two wars occurring during his lifetime had been able to deflect him. He had confidence in himself all along and now he was a star. And if he paid the formalized lip service required of the successful—'For every one who's ever

made it, there are ten with just as much talent walking the streets', he didn't really believe it. He was good and knew it. This was the Luke Barney who had disrupted the Washington Federal Theatre Project by renting a warehouse and defiantly presenting a play which had been cancelled by the project head as too left-wing. He had not the slightest interest in politics, but his part had been good and he was certain he would be seen in it. Such was the actor's magnetism even then that he had enticed into rebellion an entire company of actors including Conrad, much to the chagrin of his uncle who had by now become a senator. Luke amiably dismissed their summary discharge from the project by pointing out the advantage of the attendant publicity. And he was right since it was directly responsible for his signing a contract to do leads in a prominent New England stock company.

About a week after Conrad's encounter with Joyce at the ranch market, the friends had finished a meal of steak, mashed potatoes with country gravv, and French green salad for which Luke had prepared his own Roquefort dressing and were sitting with drinks in their hands, gazing lazily into the snapping fire. It was chilly at night up in the canyons and the warmth of the flames on top of the dinner produced a snugness more appropriate to eastern winter evenings so dear to the New England poets. Luke embarked on his favourite topic.

'Have you ever tried to figure out the single thing you would say is most essential for an actor to have?'

'You sure you haven't got any harder questions?' Conrad asked. 'That reminds me of when I was in the navy. Some guy in the fo'c'sle asked what was the most useful, a horse or a cow. The guys on the ship argued about it for over a year—maybe longer. It was still going on when I got off the tub.'

Luke brushed this away with an imperative gesture. Luke's sense of humour, kept like the rest of his character, under rigid control, was never allowed to intrude on his profession.

'No, seriously, Con,' he said. 'Haven't you ever thought about it?'

'Not too much,' Conrad confessed. 'There are so many things that go into making an actor. Besides, you didn't really specify whether you meant *good* or just successful.'

'Okay, suppose we take them one at a time. Let's start with successful.' Luke was warming to the conversation.

'You're starting with the easy one first. The main thing to have if you want to be successful is luck. I don't say it's the only thing, but it's the one thing that's got to be there no matter what other qualities may be lacking.' Conrad smiled. 'But I don't suppose you'll buy that.'

'I won't buy it! What it takes is a hell of a lot of hard work.' The star paused, then added thoughtfully, 'And that doesn't stop after you've made it. You think it's just luck that a guy who's good, spends his life pounding the pavements?'

Luke's serious intensity precluded any personal affront.

'You don't have to make that distinction,' Conrad needled him. 'There have been a lot of successful actors who were also good—and maybe in an infinitesimally small number of cases they achieved their success on the basis of talent alone, maybe despite bad luck. But what makes someone good is purely a matter of personal opinion, which varies with the person expressing it, and only too often the person who advances the opinion can't back it up. Hell, I think *I'm* good, but I couldn't tell you what makes me think so.'

'Uh-uh,' Luke objected. 'That won't do at all. *Every* actor thinks he's good. Why do you think the casting

offices are so crowded? Did you ever meet an actor who would admit he couldn't act enough to keep himself warm?'

Conrad laughed. 'Not since I saw that dead duck fly.'

'That's it. A real artist ought to have enough discipline to be able to put his finger on his own talent.'

'Balls! We're not artists. At the very best we're only superior craftsmen. The actor is a mimic with editorial values. If his values are strong enough they set a style, and that's called a good performance.'

'That's a lot of crap!' Luke exploded. 'What do you mean, mimic? It's never done an actor any permanent good to remind people of someone else.'

'You're wrong, Luke. Above all the actor has to be a familiar person. He has to relate to the commonplace things that go on around him. After all no one's ever been able to prove whether art imitates nature or nature imitates art.'

Luke clapped Conrad on the shoulder and rose from the couch. 'Well, as long as you admit it's an art I guess I made my point.'

'Okay, I'll concede,' said Conrad smiling. 'Move over Picasso, here I come. But we still haven't settled what it takes to make an actor good.'

Luke raised his arms high above his head and stretched like a cat, then strode into the adjacent bar-room.

'I guess we haven't,' he said over his shoulder. 'But there isn't time to do it tonight. I got something cooking, and we'll have to get ready.'

'Oh, what gives?' Conrad asked, stepping behind the bar and freshening up his drink.

The bar was fixed up like a western saloon, complete with old-fashioned slot machine, brass rail, and nude oil

painting over the back-bar. The *décor* suited Luke Barney since his drinking preference was straight bourbon and, at home at least, he dressed in faded dungarees and a lumberjack shirt. Since there were no stools, in deference to Luke's passion for realism, the bar was seldom used when women were in the house.

Luke, who had passed on to the bedroom, called out, 'We're going to a party.'

'We?'

'That's right.'

Luke appeared in the bedroom door naked to the waist, removing the cardboard from a clean shirt. Even remembering the bar-bells Conrad could not help but envy the star's rock-hard biceps and swelling chest.

'It suddenly occurred to me, Conrad, my boy,' Luke continued with heavy jocularly, 'that you have never been to a Hollywood party. Now this is a sin and a shame because nobody should come to Hollywood without going to at least one—and as far as I'm concerned, one is enough.'

'I don't know,' Conrad replied dubiously. 'What would I do at a party full of celebrities?'

'Drink. That's what all the rest of them will be doing. And as far as the celebrities are concerned, don't worry about it. They'll be way outnumbered by the nothings who make it as satellites—or just plain crash.'

'I don't know,' Conrad repeated.

'Sure, it ought to be a ball,' Luke replied airily. 'You better shave now, if you want to. You'll have time before the girls get here.'

'The girls? What girls?'

'We have to have a date, don't we? I got Sherry for you.'

'Sherry!'

'Sure, the little gal that was here when you first got into town—the night you got so slopped.'

'Jesus Christ, Luke, don't you think that's a little high-handed—making dates for me like that.'

'Oh, it's okay,' the star replied with easy nonchalance. 'Sherry was very impressed with you because you didn't make a pass at her. On top of that you didn't even phone her again.'

'She annoyed me. Good lord, Luke, I was very rude to the girl.'

'That's all right. It does her good. Besides I told her your uncle was a senator.'

'So what?'

'So now she'll think you're rich. Now you're a cinch.'

Conrad shook his head in despair. It was irksome that Luke's conception of his role as perfect host included 'Fixing his guest up' with a woman, and useless to attempt explaining that he would rather find his own girl in his own way. Almost without exception Luke's were the same type as Sherry, vain, flashily pretty, and monumentally stupid save for a fox-like shrewdness in their pursuit of a screen career. Conrad could be of no help in this matter. They were not interested in the practical craft of acting, but concerned mainly with short cuts, such as beauty contests, publicity, and a place on the date list of an important producer or director. If the girls paid any attention to Conrad at all he could not escape the conclusion that they were doing so in hopes of gaining favour with Luke Barney. He realized, however, since Sherry was already on her way, it would be useless to protest further.

Sherry was as he remembered her. Her make-up was skilfully applied, her body was 'luring in a form-fitting low-cut evening gown. But it was as if the face and body

were separate entities completely independent of one another, their individual perfection defying any alliance. Her vivid copper hair was still bobbed in the exaggerated poodle cut and long pendant zircons dangled, like Christmas tree trimmings, from her ears.

The other girl, whose name was Vicki, had jet black hair plastered to the side of her head in the current 'European Style' which reminded Conrad of a John Held cartoon. Aside from her colouring there was little to distinguish her from Sherry, or for that matter hundreds of girls seen daily walking Hollywood Boulevard in snug pedal pushers or sipping daiquiris in the chic Beverly Hills cocktail rooms. With her vacuous face and beautiful body she resembled an extremely well-made doll.

As they were preparing drinks for the girls Conrad ventured an aside to Luke.

'Where's Debbie?'

'Debbie? Debbie who?'

Accustomed as he was to his friend's peripatetic amours Conrad was surprised that the star could not so much as remember the girl with whom he had disappeared for several hours less than three months ago and who, by local standards at least, was every bit as beautiful as her present counterpart. Conrad wondered how many of these overly perfect creatures had come and gone in Luke's life causing not the faintest ripple on his consciousness.

# 7

EACH took his own car as Hollywood custom ranks mobility above social intercourse. As they followed the winking tail-lights of Luke's Mercedes-Benz through the intricacies of the Hollywood hills Sherry babbled about the party. She was excited at the prospect of it and Conrad found himself liking her more for knowing that some genuine emotion was capable of penetrating her lacquered calm. He, too, felt a tingling thrill of edginess, a peculiar kind of inner gooseflesh sensation, something akin to stage-fright but more like the excited nervousness of a schoolboy on his way to an important dance. He smiled ruefully as he acknowledged the power of the Hollywood legend to affect him. One of its brightest facets was the fabulous party.

The Mercedes-Benz whipped into a winding driveway. Conrad swung after it and began a steep climb which reminded him somewhat of the road which laced its way to the top of Capri although, of course, it was shorter and lacked the canopy of criss-crossed grapevines. He mentioned this to Sherry.

'Huh?' She looked at him with a puzzled expression.

'I said it's sort of like Capri—that's an island in Naples Bay.'

'Oh,' she said her forehead smooth again. 'I've never been there. I thought it was just a place in a song.'

'There is little here to detain the weary traveller,' he murmured.

'What?'

**'Nothing.'**

The road ended in a plateau the size of a small parking lot studded with a fan of structural steel beams like grease racks suspended over the void. Following Luke's lead he manoeuvred the Buick on to one of them. Below, Los Angeles was a carpet of light. They could hear music but, aside from the huge flood light illuminating the parking area, there was no other sign of life. The hill rose as sheerly in back of them as it dropped away in front of the car.

'This way, kids,' Luke called to them, and began walking towards the cliff. Conrad and Sherry followed. They came to a cave-like opening in the rock.

'We go in through here,' the star explained. 'It isn't really as difficult as it looks at first.'

The short tunnel in the stone was just high enough to permit the men to walk erect, and led to a large patio illuminated by concealed baby spots with lenses softened by vari-coloured gelatins. There was thick tropical and semi-tropical foliage and in one corner a good-sized waterfall cascaded into a carefully channelled rocky stream. On top of a promontory, a Latin band, almost entirely screened from view by brilliant green leaves, was playing a cha-cha to which some fifteen couples were dancing with varying amounts of skill and enthusiasm.

'My God!' Sherry breathed. 'It looks like an MGM musical.'

Luke laughed. 'You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until you see the house.'

It was ultra-modern and rose up the side of the hill like a gigantic set of stairs. There were three levels and they were attained by mounting steel stairways much like the ladders on a ship, only wider. Luke and Conrad manoeuvred their girls through the dancers. One or two

of the men greeted the star in passing and Luke waved negligently to them.

'Hi, Luke.'

Wave.

'That's Luke Barney.'

'I know. Who's that with him?'

'Beats me.'

The first stairway carried them into what seemed to be the main living-room and here Conrad could scarcely believe his eyes. From the very centre of the room rose an immense tree bursting with shiny green leaves. Imbedded in its solid trunk was a twenty-one inch television screen. The entire south and east walls were sheet glass through which Hollywood and Los Angeles stretched in a broad glittering panorama.

'Yeah, the tree's real,' Luke chuckled. 'There's another one growing in the bedroom.'

There was an explosion of flash bulbs as the fan magazine photographers, who were keeping vigil at the door, spotted Luke Barney. One of them approached the star.

'Hi, Luke. Would you mind if we got one of you and Melusine Lusignan, you know, the new French broad Waxman brought over?'

'Go ahead,' Luke said graciously. 'But make it fast, will you? I haven't even got a drink yet.'

The newest French discovery and her agent, a short rotund man with a bland look beneath tired lowered eyelids, were waiting near the door. She and Luke were introduced by the agent, and, after the exchange of pleasantries, posed with their arms around each other. There were two more pictures and Luke released the girl, thanking her politely. Now another celebrity was coming in and the photographers abandoned Luke for the new arrival.

'Well, that's that for the time being at least,' Luke said, joining Conrad and the two girls who had been standing modestly on the sidelines. 'Let's see if we can't find the hostess—or at least a drink.'

'Whew! Some joint!' It was Vicki's first contribution to the evening.

'Yeah, isn't it?' Luke answered. 'The man who owns it is an architect who married a woman worth a million dollars. With a combination like that you could hardly expect less.'

'What's that?' Sherry asked, clutching Luke's arm intimately and pointing to a round metallic object vaguely like a depth bomb which was suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the room.

'That's the fireplace.'

'Are you kidding?'

'No. They'll probably light it later on. Actually it makes a lot of sense. It heats the whole room, not just one side of it.'

'I suppose you're right,' the girl agreed. 'But it sure does look weird.'

They were approached by a liveried servant carrying a tray of martinis. Luke took four, which he handed around.

'Might as well drink this slop. Who knows when any one will come by with some bourbon.'

Conrad sipped his drink and looked around the room. He had wondered about the correctness of his plain blue suit, but the costumes of the guests were as bizarre and variegated as their owners themselves. In general the women wore low-necked formal gowns, although he did catch a glimpse of a platinum blonde in a leopard slack suit, but the men's clothing ranged from slacks and out-board shirts to white tie and tails. One man, whose

young-old face was scored with lines etched in by prodigious dissipation, was wearing a tuxedo with plaid lapels. Although it was early he was already a little the worse for wear.

A bluff, hearty red-faced man in a wrinkled Palm Beach suit approached them.

'Well, well, Luke,' he bellowed. 'I'm glad you could make it. Decided to come out of hibernation at last, huh? Your love life must be shot to hell'

'Hi, Jack You know how it is.' His easy reading of the non-committal line seemed to have a meaning for the other. If stardom had nothing else for Luke Barney, it had given him a degree of social ease far above the brash New York days.

'I'd like you to meet Conrad Eldred, a friend of mine from New York, and this is Vicki and Sherry. Kids, this is Jack Harold, owner, designer, and builder of this masterpiece in which we find ourselves—and, incidentally, your host.'

The red-faced man seized Conrad's hand and wrung it firmly, pumping his arm a precise three times. His eyes, however, were engaged in a rapid assessment of the two girls.

'Glad to have you here. Anything you need, just ask.'

'I hardly know what to say about your house,' Conrad responded 'It's just too fabulous for words.'

Harold laughed expansively. 'It's just like New York, it's a wonderful place for a visit, but who'd want to live there.'

\* Pleading his duties as a host and with a further injunction to enjoy themselves, Harold disappeared into the milling crowd.

'At least you're at the party officially now,' Luke said, grinning.

'Yeah.' Sherry almost sighed. 'I've always wanted to meet a man who married a million dollars. I must say he wasn't at all what I expected.'

'Wait'll you meet the million.'

At this point a shrill, almost feminine voice sounded to the rear of them.

'Luke! Luke Barney!'

A small bald headed man in what might have been a rented tuxedo scampered through the crowd of drinkers. Despite his unprepossessing appearance there was something about him which suggested importance. This impression was heightened by the alacrity with which tight groups of handsome men and women broke up in order to facilitate the progress of this ugly little man. He hustled up to where they were standing, faintly out of breath. His head barely came to Luke's shoulder.

'Luke! Luke, my boy!' There was just the faintest trace of a Jewish accent. 'I've been wanting to see you. Something came up. Do you mind if we talk a minute.'

'Mr Millic, this is Conrad Eldred from New York.'

The two girls, ignored, did their best to register unconcern.

'How do you do?' The little producer nodded perfunctorily, without offering to shake hands. Conrad mumbled a greeting which went unnoticed as the great man turned back to Luke.

'Something I gotta talk to you about, Luke,' he said and, grabbing the star's arm, began to propel him across the room. 'I hope you'll excuse us,' he flung back over his shoulder like a child prompted to belated thanks when given a piece of candy. Luke shrugged and winked as he followed in the wake of the little dynamo. Conrad looked at the two girls.

'Well, we seem to be left to our own devices.'

'So that's the great Millic.' Sherry sniffed. 'Gee, it's hard to believe a little insignificant runt like that could be such a big wheel.'

'I'd like to get my hands on some of his insignificant little money,' Vicki said with such fierce determination that Conrad felt for an instant rather embarrassed for the absent producer.

The two girls were standing rooted to the spot, their mouths slightly open, their eyes searching greedily for celebrities in the shifting mass of guests while their faces tried to convey the impression that they had been through it all many times before. Conrad's earlier anticipation was dwindling into numbed bewilderment. He shifted his feet uncertainly.

'We seem to be out of liquor,' he said. 'Why don't we go see if we can find another drink, and we can explore the house while we're at it.'

As they moved through the laughing, chattering guests, Sherry and Vicki, their heads swivelling like spectators at a tennis match, pointed out a number of picture personalities, giving capsule reviews of their latest pictures. Punctuating the girls' comments were snatches of conversation from others at the party until Conrad began to have the sensation that he was tuned into two radio stations at the same time.

'That's Shelley Winters. Gee, she sure has put on weight.'

*'Look, Honey, all I ask is that the next time you see him, you put in a word for me.'*

*'I've got a word for you, but I wouldn't put it in.'*

'—Rock Hudson. When he swung down off that ladder on to her back I thought I'd—'

*'Hell, I know what his gimmick is. He takes himself*

*so seriously he convinces other people. He couldn't direct the Last Supper if he had the original cast.'*

*'—Jane Russell. Do you suppose she'll ever make a picture again?'*

*'Well, after all, she isn't getting any younger.'*

*'—and, Darling, it's some of the most beautiful poetry ever written. It's called "This is My Beloved". You owe it to yourself to read it. I've got a copy out at the house—'*

*'—Gloria Grahame. If she deserved that Oscar I'm Bette Davis.'*

*'Sure, it'd be the most to play Hamlet. But I never never would.'*

*'Why not? Berle did.'*

*'Only on radio. Anyway, I said would, not could. Man, I'm probably the wildest Hamlet around. That's what's such a drag. The way I'd play that cat nobody would dig it. Man, that's a gassy part.'*

*'Why don't you do like Carradine did? Save your loot and send out your own company.'*

*'What loot?'*

*'Marlon Brando'*

*'—if you care for that washed-out type. But those costumes! My God, she looked like she was in drag.'*

*'Maybe she was, dear.'*

*'Charlton Heston.'*

*'—and grossed over four million. Don't tell me you can't make money with quickies.'*

*'Terry Moore.'*

*'I would have come around in the low eighties except for that friggin' dogleg on the twelfth hole.'*

In the master bedroom—it could really have been nothing else—they caught up with one of the waiters and procured three more martinis. The fact that these

were made of vodka made no difference to the girls. The wall to wall carpeting here was a long stapled white shag. In this room, too, a tree grew up from the floor complete with TV set, the screen facing an outsize bed. This was placed flat on the floor and covered with a fluffy white spread so that, at first glance, it was difficult to tell where the bed ended and the floor began. There was no other furniture in the room except for a modern white dressing-table in a far corner. The bedroom also had picture windows but these were obscured by white monkscloth drapes. Sherry, especially, was impressed.

'Wow! What a playground.'

'I wonder where the mirrors are,' Conrad said dryly.

'They take them down for the parties.' A male voice behind him replied. 'They have to. People get drunk and walk into them. Think it's another room. You know, like the fun house at the beach.'

Conrad turned to behold a familiar face. It was that of a middle-aged man, rather weakly pretty, and the familiarity was due to having seen him on the screen. He invariably played the weakling son of rich parents who died heroically in the end or was turned into a real man by a hero who married his sister. Both Vicki and Sherry knew him personally and, they began to talk animatedly about local people and places. Thus Conrad learned that name-dropping was not necessarily confined to people but it worked equally well with place names. 'The Strip', 'Malibu', and 'Palm Springs' shared equal billing with 'Tony Curtis', 'Marilyn Monroe', and 'Frank Sinatra'. They were talking about Las Vegas—Vicki saying, 'I spent a week end there one week-end,' then murmured an unheard apology and moved away from the group.

It was all a senseless montage to Conrad. Wandering

from room to room he recognized several more picture people, some of whom were stars, but there was little to distinguish them from the rest of the guests beyond the familiarity of their features through constant display on twelve sheets and the screen. The party had now broken up into well-defined groups but whether, as he suspected, these were dictated by considerations of salary and occupation he was unable to say, since he knew no one there.

He took another drink, bourbon this time, and stood like an uncertain island in the sea of confusion, wondering what he was doing at the party at all. Voices were rising and the blaring flash of photographers' bulbs through the smoke became more frequent. Although the guests greeted one another with extravagant endearments they showed no desire to meet anyone new. The bizarre surroundings did not conceal the same smug provincialism which Conrad remembered when his mother had entertained the 'important people' of Hallsville, Virginia. Tired of milling around to no purpose, Conrad armed himself with a fresh drink and sat on an ottoman near the wide picture window. He gazed down on the vast expanse of winking lights that was the city, marvelling anew that Los Angeles, encompassing so vast an area and millions of inhabitants, could remain so rural and unc cosmopolitan.

There had been no trace of Luke since he was herded off by his producer. Occasionally he thought he caught a glimpse of Sherry or Vicki in the crowd but on second glance it had turned out to be someone else. It was incredible how these women all managed to look exactly the same; no wonder Luke Barney had trouble in telling them apart. Luke's ex-wife, Stella, except perhaps for a mutually shared desire for theatrical glory, had been different from Sherry and Vicki and Debbie. At least

she was an individual, a personality in her own right. She still professed bitterness about Luke's 'desertion', as she put it, but this was due more to his subsequent success than her broken heart. It must have been bitter for Stella Gordon, as she billed herself, to face a lifetime of television bits and unemployment cheques while her husband's name screamed at her from cinema posters all over the city. But maybe it was Luke who was more hurt in the long run, for he and Stella had once had love of a sort. Certainly she had meant more to him than the steady stream of indistinguishable bathing beauties who now moved in and out of his bed with the monotonous regularity of ants on a caravan.

Conrad's reverie was interrupted by a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Patrick Guilfoyle, resplendent in a drape cut tuxedo. At his elbow was a well groomed woman of perhaps fifty.

'Conrad,' he said a trifle pompously. 'May I present my wife. Molly, this is Conrad Eldred.'

Although Patrick was more or less a constant guest at Luke Barney's house he had never brought his wife. She did not particularly approve of Luke Barney but, since he was a star and Pat had known him before their marriage, she tolerated their friendship. If she knew of her husband's extra curricular sexual activities she was indifferent to them. She had reached the age and position in life where divorce was unthinkable and, if the circles in which she travelled did not exactly condone the double standard, neither were they anxious to embark on a crusade against it.

In any event her control over her husband approached the absolute, and for a very good reason. She was quite wealthy, though by no means a spendthrift. She would say she preferred to live 'simply and graciously'—a good-

sized house in Beverly Hills, a cabin in Palm Springs, a new Cadillac, and three servants. Patrick himself drove an MG, and malicious gossip had it that only his wife's threat to take it away from him had restrained him from painting swastikas on it to designate planes he had accounted for in the war.

Molly Morgan Guilfoyle was a steely sexless model of the tailored career woman with careful coiffure and glittering eyes. She dressed very smartly, was well made up, and if her slender figure had become a trifle ropy, she could easily be reckoned ten years younger than she actually was. It was an advantage having been a child star, for people were reluctant to refer in any way to her age, since to do so played havoc with their own pretensions of youth.

Although she had not made a picture herself for many years—an attempted career as an adult had died at birth—she was heavily involved in 'women's activities'. Just what these entailed was hard to say but, Pat said, her picture was still in all the papers, but now you had to look on the society page. She kept her hand in by investing in productions and representing the film colony at various charity functions. She was shrewd and would undoubtedly have been a success in any business she chose even without the handy back-log of tax-free earnings. Patrick was given an allowance which he augmented by occasional film jobs picked up at drunken parties, promises which even a dawning sobriety had left the giver unable to retract.

She greeted Conrad politely but coldly, evidently pegging him as one of her husband's more disreputable friends. She made just the proper amount of small talk about New York then excused herself to talk to an elderly man with rimless glasses on the other side of the

room, who, judging by the attentive manner of his listeners, was someone of importance. She was not rude. It was more as if she recognized that everyone was present merely to transact some business, so the thing to do was to get about it as efficiently as possible.

Pat, who had been strangely subdued in her presence, brightened visibly as she left.

'Well, now you've met the ball and chain.'

'I remember her pictures.'

'Don't let her hear you say that. How do you like the party?'

'It's very impressive,' Conrad said truthfully. 'Of course I don't know anybody.'

'Neither do half the rest of them. Say, is Luke here?'

'Yeah, he's around somewhere. How do you think I got in?'

'That's sort of surprising. I mean, Luke doesn't go much for big brawls like this. Where is he?'

'You could fool me.' Conrad shook his head. 'The great Millic pulled him off somewhere right after we got here and I haven't seen him since.'

'Oh? Did you meet Millic?'

'In a manner of speaking,' Conrad smiled. 'I doubt if I made any burning impression on him.'

'Don't be too sure,' Pat replied seriously. 'Millic never forgets a face. John Winslow served him gas in Fresno, and a year and a half later Millic called him at the service station to test for the lead in *Bugles and Drums*.'

Conrad laughed. 'So you think I'm discovered?'

'Well stranger things have happened— Sweet Jesus, look at that blonde!'

Conrad followed Pat's pointing finger and saw the girl he had noticed earlier in the leopard slack suit.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' Pat rhapsodized. 'Would I like to get some of that. It's always tough with the old lady on the scene, but I might pick up her phone number. See you later.'

As Patrick strutted off towards his would-be conquest Conrad rose and mingled with the crowd, hoping to find Luke or one of the two girls. He felt bored and out of it, and the liquor didn't seem to be doing him much good. Having covered the house as thoroughly as possible he now decided to return to the patio in hopes they might be there dancing. Half-way down the steel stairway to the second landing he came face to face with Marvin Lurey. The agent was alone and, perhaps in deference to the occasion, had shed his brilliant sports coat in favour of a rich covert suit.

'Well, Conrad Eldred, glad to see you.'

'Hi,' Conrad responded, somewhat uncertain as to how to greet the man.

'Come on up and I'll buy you a drink,' Lurey said cordially. 'You've got a minute, haven't you?'

On the upper level Lurey piloted the actor through a doorway he had not previously noticed. It led into a kitchen and butler's pantry. Lurey went to the service bar, helped himself to two highballs, and motioned for Conrad to sit down in the breakfast nook. The waiters and caterers moving in and out of the room paid them no attention, and after the hurly-burly of the rest of the house it was relatively quiet.

'You know, Conrad,' the agent began, 'I'm glad to see you're finally making sense'

'How's that?'

'Getting out and mixing. I'd be the last one to tell you that talent doesn't count in this town—it does, but a tremendous lot of work is handed out on a social basis

as well. It's really simple when you think about it. A producer's going to cast a part. There are two actors in town who are right for it. He just saw one of them last night at a party. Who gets the job?'

'The one he thinks of first. I get your point. But it's only a fluke that I happen to be here at all. I came with Luke Barney'

'Luke could be very helpful, except he doesn't like parties very much. After all, he doesn't need them.' The agent flicked an Oriental eye in the barest suggestion of a wink. 'I'd never advise you to crash a party, exactly—but you can usually find somebody who is invited to drag you along'

Conrad was silent, and Marvin Lurey crossed his legs and made his characteristic hand steeple

'How are you getting along?' he asked

'Fine. I'm beginning to like the town more and more.'

'I'm glad to hear it. They'll be releasing the *Crime Busters* film you did soon and that ought to get you a lot more work'

'I hope so,' Conrad said.

'Incidentally, why don't you give me a ring on Monday. I may have another TV shot lined up for you.'

'Thanks, I will. I could use 't.'

'And that's something else you should realize, Conrad.' Lurey's hand wandered to his forehead in a thoughtful gesture. 'You don't call me enough.'

Conrad made a comic take. 'What?'

'I know this must sound zany for an agent to say to a client, but the fact remains that it's hard to keep everybody in my mind all the time. You ought to call twice a month—just to goose me a little.'

'Well, I didn't want to be bothering you, but if you say so I will from now on.'

Lurey stood and spread his arms in a broad, resigned gesture. 'See, there I go making more trouble for myself. When am I ever going to learn to keep my big mouth shut?'

'Mr Lurey——'

'Marvin—Marvin! You're in Hollywood now.'

'All right, Marvin I'd like to ask you a question.'

'Shoot.'

'When you called me back that day—did you look me up in *Burns Mantle*?'

Lurey laughed and clapped Conrad on the shoulder 'You're damn right I did. That was a nudnick trick you pulled, walking out like that.' His expression was serious for a moment. 'Or maybe it was smart. Anyway, don't forget to get in touch with me Monday.'

Conrad watched the agent make his way through the swinging doors into the main body of the party and then, feeling conspicuous alone in the kitchen, he let himself out the small door to the stairway. He made a quick cursory investigation in the lower level of the house but was still unable to find Luke or the two girls

Out on the patio the Latin band was still playing, but now the yard was so full that the couples were barely moving, with little semblance of rhythm in their allotted two feet of floor space. He saw no one he knew among the dancers so he wandered over to the waterfall to see how it worked. Two figures partially concealed by a palmetto were locked in a tight embrace. The girl had her back to him but he recognized Sherry's gown and brilliant copper hair. Conrad pushed through the dancers towards the cave-like exit, manœuvring around

a man who, having played the title role in the film biography of a notorious gangster, was now drunkenly trying to needle a well-known Mexican prize-fighter into a brawl.

At the first service station at the bottom of the hill Conrad stopped, found an open phone booth, and called Joyce Rayner.

# 8

JOYCE answered promptly which seemed to indicate that she was not asleep. It had suddenly occurred to him that he had no business calling anyone at this time of night, least of all a girl whom he scarcely knew and whom he had last deposited on her doorstep in a cloud of surly silence. However, her voice was still cheerful when he announced who he was and when he apologized for the lateness of the hour she passed it off lightly.

'Oh, my room mate and I are both night owls. I'm usually just getting home from work about now. Only tonight's my night off.'

'Mine too,' Conrad asked. 'Are you doing anything?'

'It's one-thirty in the morning.'

'I thought you said you were a night owl.' His tone became more urgent. Somehow it became quite imperative that he see this girl 'I'd really like to talk to you.'

There was the briefest pause.

'Okay, if you promise not to get sore again. Do you remember where I live?'

'Yeah.'

'Can you get here from where you are in time for us to get a drink?'

'Yeah.'

'Then what are you waiting for?' Joyce asked, and hung up.

She was waiting on the porch when he got there, wearing a sweater and skirt, with the luxuriant hair

caught severely in a horse's tail, and no make-up. It was a pleasant contrast to the garishly painted, over-dressed women he had left at the party.

'I was beginning to think you had caught one of Hollywood's most dread diseases,' she greeted him.

'What's that?'

'Telephonitis. Hollywood has been profoundly affected by Don Ameche. Are you quite sure a little bit of it hasn't rubbed off?'

'Well, maybe some.' Conrad laughed. 'To tell you the truth, I was kind of thrown for a minute. I didn't really expect such a cordial reception.'

'Don't be misled. I just wanted that drink.'

Conrad took her arm. 'Then we'd better not stand here all night and talk about it. Let's go.'

Joyce suggested the Nickodell, which was near her home, and they got there just before closing. Since it didn't seem to matter what he put on top of the hideous mixture he had consumed at the party, Conrad decided to go along with Joyce on whisky and water.

'Ever been here before, Conrad?'

'No, I haven't.'

'It's a big radio hang-out.'

They sat without speaking until the waiter brought their drinks. Conrad caught himself staring at the girl, taking in the intelligent features dominated by a full rich mouth and large calm green eyes. She returned his scrutiny frankly, without the embarrassment or coquetry he found so annoying in most women. Joyce broke the silence.

'Mind a question?'

'No, what?'

'How did you happen to call?'

'I don't really know,' Conrad said truthfully. 'I didn't

like it where I was. I thought of you and—— well, I guess maybe I think we got off on the wrong foot the last time we met.'

'Yes, I guess we did. Let's forget about it, shall we?'

Conrad smiled. 'Then, too, maybe I was taken by the dramatic fashion in which we met.'

'Yeah, it was kind of exciting. A lot better than crosswire.'

'What's that?'

'What's what?'

'Crosswire.'

'You are a stranger in town if you don't know about crosswire. When you get a busy signal on the phone, you hear voices between the beeps. Then you trade numbers and call each other. It's one of the favourite Hollywood dating methods.'

'I'm just as glad ours happened the way it did.'

And it was true.

He was glad that he had yielded to his sudden impulse to call the girl. How many women, he wondered, would skip an opportunity for a long recriminatory post-mortem about the previous misunderstanding. Her sane naturalness was a relief after the party. He had not known the people there or understood the various undercurrents running through the gathering, but the miasmic atmosphere he sensed nearly choked him. Now Joyce was like a breath of fresh air. He grinned at her.

'Okay. What are we going to do when they eight-six us here?'

'You called me. Don't you have the evening planned?'

'You forget I'm a stranger in town. Why don't we go where *you* want to go. Then maybe I'll learn some new places.'

She looked at him dubiously. 'I hope you don't mean

after-hours spots. I'm not really such a lush as I sounded on the phone.'

'God, no!' Conrad said fervently. 'I've already had enough liquor tonight to float the *Queen Mary*. Aren't there any points of interest?'

'Points of interest? You mean like Grant's Tomb?' She giggled. 'Not at two in the morning, but we *could* go have breakfast somewhere.'

'I'll buy that.'

'You're supposed to. You're the man. Are you pro- or anti disc jockey?'

'That pretty much depends on what the guy plays. Why?'

'I mean, do you want one with your meals?'

'If I have my choice, I'd rather not.'

'You're in safe hands then. I know all the disc jockey restaurants in town, and believe me, that's no mean feat. There are an awful lot of them.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. But as I say, we're safe. I've marked the kerbs.'

'Like the bums, huh?'

'What?'

'Bums. Knights of the road. They're supposed to carry chalk with them and wherever they get a hand-out they make a mark on the fence, so the next guy will be sure not to pass it.'

'Oh? Well, my marks mean be sure to *pass* it.'

They went to a Coffee Dances and had waffles. Then, since the night was unusually warm, Joyce suggested they go for a ride. To his own astonishment Conrad found himself asking her to drive, another indication of the new sense of relaxation he felt with this girl. He was not in the habit of trusting his car to anyone, especially a strange woman.

Joyce drove expertly and soon they were on Woodrow Wilson Drive, high atop the Hollywood Hills. To one side they could see the San Fernando Valley stretching in a scattered pattern of lights as far as the eye could see. On the other lay the more dense mass of Los Angeles. Above was a skyful of stars blinking a brilliant blue in contrast to the yellow and red glow below. At one particularly favourable vantage point Joyce pulled the convertible off the road. They sat silently, taking in the night.

'It's very beautiful, isn't it?' Joyce finally said, leaning her head back against the seat.

'Yeah.'

'I love California.'

There was another silence. The girl turned to him.

'You're not very talkative, are you?'

'Sometimes I am. I'm a real terror when I get started ' Again there was a pause.

'Conrad.'

'Yeah.'

'How did you happen to come out to the coast?'

'Why not?'

'You don't seem like the type, somehow '

'You mean I'm not old enough to retire yet?'

Joyce laughed. 'Partly that. I like it here but there doesn't seem to be any percentage here for you Couldn't you get better bar-tender jobs in other places—say in New York. And if you couldn't stand the climate there, Florida, for instance?'

'Isn't that heresy?'

'I suppose so. But, seriously?'

'I'd never been here before. I just thought I'd take a look at it.'

'Have you always been a bar-tender?' she asked curiously.

'No, I've done a lot of other things. I drove a cab, I worked on a construction gang in Mexico, I went to sea. I've been a salesman, a stevedore, a soda jerk, and—well, a lot of others.'

Although Conrad had had recourse to all these occupations at one time or another they had been temporary expedients when things were bad in the theatre. It was shameful to be evasive with this girl whose own forthright manner had so charmed him, but he had unaccountable misgivings that to tell her he was an actor would write a quick ending to their story before it fairly had a chance to get under way. His fears were confirmed sooner than he had expected.

'Not that it really matters to me what a person does for a living. There's nothing I hate worse than these people who can't wait to ask, "What do you?" right after being introduced to someone. As if you had to *do* something! What they really mean is, what is your artistic pretension.'

'They might be genuinely interested,' Conrad suggested.

'If they are they'll find out soon enough, if they're sufficiently interested in the *person*. It's only the phonies who are so anxious to find out the ground rules. That's why I hate the picture people so much. They don't even care about the artistic pretensions. They're asking, "What can you do for me?" They're not *genuinely* interested in anybody who can't do them some good in the rotten studios—especially actors. You ought to see them at the drive in! With their lord of the manor air and their ten-cent tips. Do you get actors where you work?'

'Not many,' Conrad replied, with a sinking feeling. 'The Raven is just a small neighbourhood bar.'

'You're lucky.'

'You're rather bitter about actors.'

'You'd be bitter, too, if you'd gone through what I have. I love Southern California, but— oh, hell, I guess you'd better brace yourself. I don't drink much and sometimes I go on a talking jag. This looks like one of the times.'

'Go ahead. There's no one to listen except me and a few million stars—not the movie variety, just those up there.'

'Okay. You asked for it.'

Joyce's mother was a beauty in her day, of which two corroborative pieces of evidence remained. The first was a bachelor character actor who came regularly to dinner every other Sunday. He entered bearing under his arm a half-pound box of candy which he thrust at Joyce's mother with the unfailing line, 'By Gad, Lily, you're getting more beautiful every single day.' Since her father had died, when she was ten, Joyce had often wondered why her mother had never married Mr Aldous.

Perhaps this was explained by Exhibit B, a pitifully thin scrapbook of yellowed clippings and faded pictures compiled when she was Lily Shoemaker. The blurred photographs revealed a thin, delicate face with cupid bow lips beneath a thick mass of marcelled hair. They bore a faint resemblance to stills of Mary Pickford in the days when she was America's sweetheart, and any comment on the likeness would send Lily Rayner into an aggrieved silence. She had appeared in several silent films and had been, and the few clippings seemed to bear this out, well on her way to stardom. Then she made what she for ever after referred to as 'the mistake of my life'.

It was on location for a picture called *Devil Aces* that she met and married Bill Rayner, a stunt pilot with no interest in the movie industry beyond the daily hundred dollars he received for risking his life in the miserable contraption of spit, canvas and baling wire they called an airplane. His duties were to impersonate, at a safe distance from the camera, a black-moustached leading man of the day. The fact that he sufficiently resembled the movie hero to impersonate him at all, combined with the glamour of his occupation, had swept Lily Shoemaker off her feet. They were married on the old Pathé lot in considerable ceremony with the director and even the black-moustached hero insisting upon kissing the bride.

But then Lily Shoemaker's bubble burst, for the Hollywood of that era, despite its free-flowing gin and hitherto unsuspected uses for Coca Cola bottles, had a duty to its vast audience. If the *ingénue*, embodiment of virginal purity should be married in private life, it imposed too great a strain on the movie goer's credulity, so the meats from Lily's bridal table were served warmed over at the wake of her career. Besides, Bill Rayner, who was quick to perceive in the disappointing box office of *Devil Aces* the end of the 'Aviation' cycle, went back to his old track of carnival barnstorming. Nor could he find it at all unreasonable to expect his wife to accompany him.

If there was a lingering hope that Lily might yet rise to stardom it was removed with the pending arrival of a child. The stork, as Bill Rayner put it, made a three-point landing and by the time she was barely a year old Joyce had made a parachute jump over Ames, Iowa, clutched in her father's arms. As soon as Lily Rayner heard of this dare-devil feat with Joyce, according to

her father, enjoyed—"The little monkey was laughing all the way down"—she snatched the child from its father and returned to Hollywood to survey ruefully the wreckage of her life.

The stars in Lily's eyes, though dimmed, were not yet extinguished. She cherished a hope that, where she had failed, her only child—the birth of Joyce had been difficult and had precluded any more children even had Lily wanted them—would achieve the diadem her mother had so witlessly thrown away. But it soon appeared that even this was not to be, for the child of a beautiful mother and an undeniably handsome father was inexplicably referred to by Lily's well wishers as 'bright' or 'lively'. This had deadly significance for a mother whose own childhood had been graced with adjectives like 'lovely', 'gorgeous', and 'beautiful'. Nor did Joyce improve as she grew older, and, while Lily was conscientious in her parental duties, she went about them with the same stoic martyrdom as the mother of a cretin child. When the news of Bill Rayner's death in the crash of a flying Jennie reached his wife she looked upon it as the final injustice that it hadn't happened long before it did.

Through some friends who felt sorry for her plight, Lily was given a job, on a piecemeal basis, making wigs for men and women whose subsequent luck had been better than hers. Few of the heroes and heroines of movieland are bald, but current styles often vary with those of a 'period' picture, or sometimes a reigning raven-haired beauty is, in the unanimous opinion of the director and producer, the only one to play the beautiful red-headed temptress in *Ginger* (colour by Technicolor), and Lily would be commissioned to create a hairpiece for her. It was a tedious and painstaking process, the hair by hair application of human tresses, bought in

some mysterious way by the studios, to a pre-glued net which was fixed on a head-shaped milliner's form. Lily Rayner supported herself and Joyce in this fashion until the daughter was through high school, disdaining in her lingering vanity the use of glasses, bending closer and closer to the tangle of human hair, separating each individual strand with a needle and applying it to its base. She was still working in pictures.

Joyce was soon aware of her mother's ideas about physical beauty as well as her ill concealed belief that her daughter was totally lacking in it. Her reaction was a violent rebellion against the Hollywood orthodoxy. She rejected the more dramatic stylizings of her school-mates so that, during the Betty Grable era her hair had remained its tawny brown and while Veronica Lake reigned it was still possible to see both of Joyce's eyes. She had been immune to bangs, page boys, feather cuts, and poodle cuts. She was dowdy and her home life was one of constant reproach.

It was not until college that Joyce began to mature and develop the startling comeliness she now possessed. Boys were attracted to her, something which her mother had convinced her would never happen unless they were after only 'one thing', the nature of which she left more or less to the girl's imagination. A few disastrous encounters with campus wolves seemed to bear out her mother's conclusion. She had tired of college, so she left home and took a job.

'So, that's Joyce Rayner to date,' she concluded. 'And I must say you're a very patient listener to a very dull story.'

Conrad was touched by the unemotional, even jocose recital. He was drawn to the girl because of her honesty and courage. He rested his arm on the seat behind her.

'You know, of course, it isn't true,' he said softly. 'You're really very, very attractive.'

'Yeah, I know,' she replied in her brittle fashion. 'A man once told me I reminded him of the girl secretary type who was so popular in pictures in the 'thirties. I think he really meant it as a compliment but I never went out with him again.'

'I find you very desirable.'

The girl's shoulders stiffened. 'What comes now—the pitch?'

Conrad withdrew his arm. 'Yeah, I guess it was going to be—but skip it.'

'It's always the same old story I suppose it's my fault for driving up here in the first place. You'd think after a lifetime in this lousy den of wolves I'd learn.' She turned around and faced him angrily, her green eyes glinting with suspicious moisture 'Why don't you go get yourself a pick-up on the Boulevard if you want somebody? Why pick on me?'

Conrad felt his own anger rising 'The trouble with you is that your mother convinced you everybody wants to get into your pants But maybe if you'd stop to analyse it a moment you might come to the conclusion that there are other things a guy might be interested in. As far as I'm personally concerned any relationship with a woman which excludes sex is incomplete and downright stupid but, by the same token, sex is only a small part of it and, in spite of your motion picture mores, it alone isn't nearly enough to make *me* attracted to a girl—not by a long shot.

'And another thing, that crack about the Boulevard pick-up was strictly out of line. I don't guess there's any way for you to know it, but I don't happen to go for sexual smorgasbord. I'm strictly a meat, potatoes and

pie boy—and I always have been. So now that I've had my say you can drive back to Hollywood whenever you feel like it.'

With a vicious gesture he pulled out a cigarette and tamped it down on the side of the car door.

'Well, what are you waiting for? Why don't you start the car?'

Joyce looked at him pleadingly, a tear running down each cheek. She put her hand on his sleeve and clutched it tightly.

'Are you, Conrad?' Her voice was low and choked. 'Are you really?'

'Am I what?'

'A—a meat, potatoes and pie boy?'

Conrad turned in the seat to face her. 'Look, Joyce, there's no reason for you to believe this but I left a big Hollywood party—that's right, stars and everything—to say nothing of a redhead who would knock the eyes out of ninety-nine out of a hundred guys, I left her and the party flat to call you. Do you know why? Because not one of them had the slightest degree of human honesty and I thought you did. And as a matter of fact I still think so.'

Joyce threw herself into his arms, burying her head in the lapel of his jacket. Slipping off the *barette* which imprisoned it he stroked the long wavy hair tenderly. She lifted her face to his. They kissed, first tentatively and then with a warm passion which stirred Conrad like a passage from a great play. His arms tightened around her and he could feel the pressure of her firm breasts against him. She twisted slightly, threw both arms around his neck, and with her hands in his hair pulled his face closer to hers.

'Conrad,' she almost sobbed. 'Do you think we've found it?'

'I don't know honey,' he replied huskily. 'It sure as hell looks like it.'

They kissed again and desire for her rose like a roaring tide. He moved his hands over her body, feeling the voluptuous curves, pressing her to him. She, too, responded, forcing her body closer and closer to him. Then abruptly she broke away.

'Conrad, darling, this isn't right. It's—it's like a couple of high school kids in dad's car. Oh, I want you so, Conrad, but not this way.'

He drew back. 'You know the set-up with my room, and you——'

'And I have a room mate,' she finished.

There was a silence. Conrad stared stubbornly out into the night.

'Conrad,' she said presently in a tiny voice.

'What?'

'There's an old California custom that maybe you didn't know. Didn't you ever hear of motels?'

# 9

THEY stayed in the motel until almost noon. From the start there was an indefinable empathy between them which obviated the fumbblings and uncertainties so common in initial love. They had come together as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if they were mere vessels enacting a decree of fate ordained in some remote and distant past. The night had been tender and beautiful, and like nothing Conrad had ever experienced before.

Conrad, although he lacked Luke Barney's astounding looks, had known his share of women. Indeed, until he had come to Hollywood he had never been particularly conscious of any physical inferiority. True, it was the rest of the nation which had enshrined a number of beauty gods and goddesses on a silver screen, but nowhere were their altars so zealously kept as here in the temple of movieland. He could easily understand Joyce's lack of confidence in herself after a lifetime of these values, if he were so affected by them in the short space of a few months. But now, he thought exultantly, uncertainties would be a thing of the past. They would build together a beautiful and lasting relationship far above the rabbit-warren matings of the national deities.

Joyce stretched lazily in the double bed. 'I sure hate to get up in the morning. Do you suppose that's very criminal of me?'

'I hope not.' Conrad laughed, feeling very good. 'Because if it is, I guess I'm guilty as charged. I wouldn't be up myself if I wasn't so hungry.'

The girl sat up and ran her fingers through her tousled hair. The sheet slipped down over the swell of bare firm breasts. Desire rose in him again, but lazily, a reaction from repletion. As she swung her bare feet to the floor displaying perfectly rounded calves, he felt unreasonably happy and possessive. He bent over and kissed her. She returned his kiss briefly and began to carefully roll on her stockings.

'You know, you come up with some positively brilliant ideas at times,' she said brightly 'And breakfast is certainly one of them.'

'I'm glad you approve. Any suggestions?'

'Well, I guess if I were properly sentimental I'd say the ranch market, but the food is so terrible Besides,' she added with a delicious shiver, 'I'm not sure I could stand up that long.'

'Oh, come on. It wasn't that bad.'

'Who said it was bad?'

They went to one of the bigger restaurant chains in Westwood, and Conrad wondered again why California, with its almost perpetual sunshine, had never taken to the open air restaurants so common in Paris or even New York. As they smoked cigarettes over the second cup of coffee, Joyce scrutinized him thoughtfully over the table.

'Conrad'

'What is it, honey?'

'Was it all right?' Her voice was uncertain, pleading

'Don't you know?'

'It was heaven But I'm . . . well, I kid a lot but I haven't really had very much experience with . . . with love.'

'Joyce, baby,' he said tenderly 'Love is the one area in which you have to trust your feelings. You can't

intellectualize about it. All I can say is, I've never known anything like it was last night.'

'I felt that, too.' She nodded her head seriously. 'I'm not going to get all weepy and maudlin, but even . . . well, even if it just turns out to be a ship that passes in the night, I wouldn't regret it. I want you to know that.'

'Sorry to disappoint you, honey, but it looks like you're going to be stuck with me for quite a while from here on. And, just to prove that my intentions are honourable, as soon as you finish that coffee and put on some lipstick, I'm going to take you to meet my boss.'

'Your boss?'

'Yeah. You see my parents are back in Virginia, and anyway, they've practically disowned me, so what else can an honest young man do?'

'Why did your parents disown you?'

'They wanted me to take over the family bank and I had different ideas.'

'All right. But I haven't the faintest idea what I'm supposed to say to him.'

'You don't have to worry. Just be yourself. I think you'll like him if you don't let his professional cynicism and hoodlum vocabulary throw you.'

'You make him sound kind of grim.'

'Not at all. It's just that when you've been in the whisky business all your life you tend to look at things with a somewhat jaundiced eye. Actually, in his own way, Jack is very sentimental. He fell madly in love with a call-girl down on Sixth Street, married her and now they're buying a house up in Laurel Canyon. You'll eventually meet her too. She's even more inclined to moonlight and roses than he is, but maybe that's an understandable reaction to her former calling. Anyway,

he's a hell of a good boss and it will probably raise my standing with him when he sees what a wonderful girl friend I've got.'

'Flattery will get you nowhere.'

'Not flattery. Just the facts, ma'am.'

They drove back to Hollywood on Sunset, sitting close to one another as the warm sunshine poured into the open car. Suddenly a gross, grey-haired woman stepped from the kerb in front of the Buick. Conrad slammed on the brakes with an oath. The woman ambled in leisurely defiance across the street, waving and talking over her shoulder to a companion on the kerb. As the line of cars piled up behind him Conrad reflected that, in spite of the boringly repetitious radio jokes about the pedestrians' plight in Los Angeles, they had the law all in their favour. In New York an old woman dawdling across the street in this fashion was very apt to be hit broadside by a hurtling cab, crosswalk or no. He kicked the car into low and started up again.

Joyce looked at Conrad curiously. 'You don't like California, do you?'

'Why? Because of that idiot woman?'

'No. That's enough to make anybody mad. You just don't like it generally, do you?'

'What makes you say that then?'

'You don't bitch about it. Everybody else does.'

'So if I don't bitch about it that means I don't like it? Is that what you mean?'

'You know damn well what I mean! We bitch about it but we stay. But you've never even *got* here yet. I don't really know how to say it, but it's like you're living somewhere else all the time—only I don't even know where that is.'

'You have too vivid an imagination. I like California,

especially southern California.' He grinned at her. 'And I'm beginning to like it more and more all the time.'

'Just the same,' she persevered, serious in her intuition. 'I have the feeling you *don't* like it. You never *say* anything. It isn't natural to live in California and not talk about it.'

Arriving at The Raven they found Jack Ward behind the bar, deeply engrossed in a game of liar's poker with several of the regular customers. This game, played with the serial numbers from dollar bills, was a great favourite at The Raven and was defiantly encouraged by Jack since dice cups and pinball machines had been driven out of California by the Kefauver Crime Committee, which he called 'a sanctimonious bunch of political con men'. Conrad and Joyce took stools at one end of the bar and when the betting was over Jack came down and stood in front of them.

'A little early, ain't you, kid?' he grunted. 'What are you going to have?'

Conrad looked inquiringly at Joyce

'Whisky and water,' she said.

'I'll have a screw-driver, Jack.' Conrad had once been told by an old-time bar-tender that if a drinker 'mixed them up' he would never get himself hooked by alcohol, as it was the taste buds which made a man an alcoholic. Conrad had placed no more credence in this than in the numerous theatrical superstitions about hats on a bed or round backed trunks, but he still switched off regularly.

Beneath his careless unconcern as he mixed the vodka and orange juice Jack Ward was covertly assessing Joyce. Since Conrad had never before appeared in the bar with a girl and had carefully refrained from any entanglements with single, and sometimes anxious, female customers, the manager was naturally curious but aside from that, the

warm inner glow left from the magic night must communicate itself to a man as observant as Jack. He set the drinks on the bar and stood making unnecessary circles with his cloth.

'I'll tell you what I'll do, kid,' he said belligerently, realizing that Conrad's silence was in the nature of a rib. 'If you'll knock me down to the girl friend, I'll make these on the house.'

'I'm Joyce Rayner,' she said, smiling in her open fashion. 'And you're Jack Ward. And, believe it or not, the main reason we came in here was so that I could meet you.'

Although Jack raised his eyebrows ironically, Conrad could tell he was pleased.

'That's right, Jack. I promised her if she was a real good girl you might even show her the whip you beat the help with.'

'Very funny Tell me, Joyce, how did you ever get mixed up with a bum like this whose only gift is with a nimble bar rag in the customer's change?'

'I guess it was fate,' she answered demurely.

'Some fate!' Jack snorted, and went back to his liar's poker.

'I like him,' Joyce said turning to Conrad. 'Is he always so gruff?'

'No, not always. It's when he's polite that you can tell he doesn't like somebody. You passed with flying colours.'

'Well, I'm glad "the folks" approve.' She suddenly turned to him, a tiny frown marring her forehead. 'Conrad, you know this is all kidding. I mean, I'm not trying to trap you into anything'

'You mean, like marriage?'

'Well, yes. Maybe it isn't very loyal to my sex to say so, but I know that a lot of girls do that. That is, manoeuvre

a man into a situation and then try to take advantage of him. I just wanted you to know I wasn't trying anything like that.'

'I didn't think you were, honey, but it's nice of you to clear it up. While we're on the subject I suppose we might as well get the whole thing straightened out. Last night . . . well, last night, to me at least, was something pretty special. Maybe I'm taking a lot for granted but from here on I'm going under the assumption that you're my girl and——'

'I am, Conrad,' she said softly. 'Just as long as you want it that way.'

'Thanks, Joyce,' he said, and felt joy leap up in him. 'Anyway I ought to tell you. I've had some girls in my time, I was married once—divorced now—but I've always been strictly a one-girl guy. It isn't a question of morals so much—or maybe it is. Even modern morality frowns on deceit and promiscuity. Anyway, the point I'm trying to get at in my own lumbering fashion is that when I'm for you, I'm *for* you—and nobody else.'

'I understand. And, darling, I feel the same way.' She put her hand on his on the bar and suddenly Conrad felt better than he had in years.

'Tell me about your wife, Conrad. That is, if you want to.'

'There really isn't much to tell. I met her at a party. Neither Dolores nor I had much in common with the rest of the guests. They were all interested in football and yachting and the rest of that Ivy League crap. She worked on a magazine and I guess I found her intellectually stimulating. We started going around together. It probably would have been all right except that I was pretty young and kept needling her into getting married. We finally did, and from then on it was one big quarrel after

the other. Then towards the end it settled into one of those sterile domestic arrangements when the only time we had anything to do with each other was at meal-times or when company came by.'

'I'm sorry.'

'There's nothing to be sorry about. We parted amicably enough. She went on with her magazine and I went on with . . . well, my life '

Jack Ward came back to their place at the bar.

'Okay, meatball,' he rasped to Conrad. 'You've been free-loading long enough. You've just got time to buy a drink yourself before we go to dinner I'm having a double bourbon.'

'As if you don't have enough money already,' Conrad grumbled, putting a five-dollar bill on the bar. 'But, okay, go ahead, be a pig. And what's all this about dinner?'

'You and Joyce are having dinner with me and the old lady. I just phoned her. There's a couple of things I want to warn this girl about you, only, not being the type who talks behind a guy's back, I guess you got to come along too. Unless you've got other plans, Joyce?'

'Not at all ' She grinned maliciously at Conrad 'I'd *love* it.'

'Wait a minute, Jack,' Conrad protested. 'I'm supposed to work tonight.'

'Not any more you ain't I also called the extra man and he's comin' in. Unless it's gonna ruin you to miss your tips for one night.'

'In this joint? Don't be absurd.'

Jack's house in Laurel Canyon, like most of the others there, ran raggedly up the hill in a haphazard terraced arrangement Nearest the street there was a roomy garage of two storeys, each having an entrance to the sloping hillside. Thus upon driving the car in one could either

mount to the second storey by inside stairs or by the outside path. At right angles to the garage, and still higher up on the hill, was the main house of nine generous rooms. Within this angle a portion of the slope had been levelled off and fitted with a good-sized swimming pool.

Jack's wife, Sally, met them at the door, an apron tied over her apple green suit and her peroxide hair pinned back in a loose bun. She was in her middle thirties, a slender woman with a good figure and a bemused expression about her eyes, as if she had suddenly inherited a million dollars and could not quite believe it. Conrad knew little about her background beyond her former profession, which Jack had once confided to him in his toughest voice, as if daring the younger man to take issue with it. It was easy to see that Jack was very much in love with her and she in turn worshipped the ground her misanthropic husband walked on. Jack regarded romance as 'True Confession bushwa', but his proposal must have been a dream come true to Sally. She was only too willing to relinquish the sordid prospect of diminishing earnings as youth fled until the final years exchanging favours for the petty silver of Bunker Hill winos. She loved and admired Jack, and made him an excellent wife in all respects.

Following formal introductions the two women retired to the kitchen and Jack built two drinks at the portable bar.

'That Joyce seems like a nice kid, Conrad. A real change after these Hollywood phonies'

'She was born and raised here'

'The hell you say! Well, she sure don't act like it. Are you two serious?'

'I only just met her.' Conrad was somewhat embarrassed

though he knew that Jack's questions were motivated by kindness rather than by mere mordant curiosity.

Jack seemed to sense this for he went on defensively.

'Look kid, I ain't tryin' to butt into your business. But, damn it, you work for me and it's my responsibility to keep my employees happy, ain't it?' Then with a shame-faced return to his habitual heavy sarcasm. 'Although you sure are one hell of a lousy bar-tender.'

'It's all right, Jack. It's just that we haven't known one another very long. In fact, last night was our first date.'

The bar manager paced nervously across the room scowling ferociously, a sure indication that he was on the verge of defying what he fondly believed to be his own nature and doing something sentimental.

'Look here, kid,' he barked. 'We're pretty good friends, ain't we? Even if I am your boss?'

'I hope so, Jack.' Conrad answered sincerely, for he had come to be quite fond of this man whose genuine humanity was so imperfectly concealed beneath his hard exterior.

'Well then, I'm going to cop out to you. You ain't livin'. You're stuck in a furnished room, you don't go out, up to now I ain't even seen you with a girl. Christ, man, you're young and you ain't even living. Okay, this isn't New York. There ain't doodly-poo for laughs in this god-forsaken hole in the first place, but what there is you ought to be getting them. You're turning into a goddam beach-comber!'

Conrad had to admit there was a great deal of truth in what his employer was saying. Without the necessity of making the rounds, and the many other driving stimulations of New York, he had begun to sink into a sort of tropical lethargy, letting each day go by in an unending

pattern of indolence. He recalled Marvin Lurey's remarks at the party. He hadn't even been calling his agent.

'Now you've met this girl,' Jack was continuing. 'And she seems like a pretty decent cookie. She might even be able to shake you out of the dumps and get you to act like a man. But you can't expect even a nice girl—*especially* a nice girl like her to go around with a clown who's living in a two by four furnished room.'

The manager glowered at Conrad, daring the younger man to deny the truth of his indictment

'I guess you're right.'

'Okay,' Jack continued triumphantly 'So I've got a proposition for you. Over the garage there's a nice little two-room apartment with a kitchen, shower, and some fairly decent furniture. It's supposed to be for the help but I ain't the kind of guy who wants to have other people waiting on me so we never have used it. Now if you want to I'll rent it to you.'

He raised an admonitory hand to cut off any objection.

'Now wait a minute before you say anything. If you take the joint Sally and I will leave you strictly alone. I'm not a stool pigeon and neither is she. Anyway, the buildings are far enough apart that nobody has to know what goes on in either place. Besides, you got the swimming pool. We never use it but you're probably crazy enough to let the goddam sun bake out what little brains you got left.'

Jack Ward poured himself a straight shot which he tossed back quickly as if exhausted by the long speech he had just delivered. Conrad tried to collect his thoughts.

'What am I, an orphan?' He temporized, gesturing to the bottle in Jack's hand 'Or can I have a drink too?'

'You guzzle all the profits at work and now you're on my back at home too,' Jack growled, at the same time

pouring his guest a formidable portion. 'Well, what do you say?'

'It's very generous of you, Jack. It really seems like a good idea. Let me think about it over the week-end, will you?'

'Okay, but if you're smart you'll take me up on it.'

'I probably will,' Conrad said. 'But do me a favour, will you? Don't say anything to Joyce about it—that is until I'm sure what I'm going to do.'

'You're the doctor.'

They went on to talk about things at The Raven until Joyce and Sally came in to announce that dinner was ready. It was a simple meal, excellently prepared, meat loaf, baked potatoes and steamed vegetables. When the dinner was over, and Jack and Conrad had washed the dishes, they played nickel ante poker until one in the morning.

'I like Sally very much,' Joyce said, when they were driving home.

'I noticed that you and she seemed to hit it off well.'

'Jack is wonderful for her.'

'Jack's a nice guy.'

'She'll be so happy when they get the child.'

'What?'

'Oh, she's not pregnant.' Joyce laughed, then her face sobered. 'She can't be. She's had a complete hysterectomy, so she'll never be able to have children of her own. They're going to adopt one though—a boy—as soon as the mortgage on the house is whittled down. Next year sometime. They've been married now for three years.'

'You seem to have found out a great deal about them.'

'Just woman talk. I think Sally is going to be a wonderful mother.'

Conrad laughed. 'It's kind of hard to picture Jack as a

father, though. He'll probably tie bells on a coat and train the kid to be a pickpocket.'

'Conrad!'

By unspoken agreement Conrad took Joyce straight to her apartment. Conrad could hardly believe that any girl should have become so important to him in so short a time. He wanted desperately to tell her of his feelings, to bind her closer to him with words, but was brought short in the face of their woeful inadequacy. He could only hope Joyce sensed his thoughts. After a lingering tender kiss he left her on the doorstep and drove slowly home. In the past twenty-four hours his life had altered drastically and would never be the same again.

# 10

SEVERAL reasons impelled Conrad to accept Jack Ward's offer of the apartment in Laurel Canyon. The first and most important of these, of course, was Joyce. It was somewhat alarming, to experience for the first time at nearly forty a passionate, all-pervading love usually associated with youths in their teens. And yet his feeling for Joyce was a mature one, necessarily so, since it was her own maturity, intelligence and poise which so attracted him. His were solid thoughts, involving constancy, an end to the 'wanderjahre', a home and even marriage. And these same unprecedented attitudes towards her made him reject in disgust a relationship entailing parked cars and dingy motels.

But, had it not been for Joyce, other considerations would have forced him into making the change. He had called Marvin Lurey as requested with the result that he was hired for another television job. The agent also informed him that the *Crime Busters* film he made that spring was to be released the following week. This, Lurey advised him, would surely result in more work and the Blakeys several infirmities made the transmission of telephone messages something less than accurate. If more acting work was indeed to be forthcoming he would need his own telephone, hooked up to some answering service. Also, Lurey's remarks at the party, underlined the social limitations of a furnished room.

Another powerful inducement for the new arrangement was the swimming pool. There was a lot to what

Jack Ward said about his growing slothful in the tropical atmosphere and an hour or so daily in a California swimming pool was certainly more pleasant exercise than tramping the pavements from office to office in New York. Conrad was no cultist about his body. He had participated in sports in school but his slender frame had adapted itself more to basketball than football, more to track and swimming than baseball and wrestling. Now this very slimness stood him in good stead at an age when many of his heavier contemporaries were running to flesh. So although his physique would never set a million hearts a-flutter, his body was an efficient machine. It was healthy and had an unobtrusive strength developed by intermittent years of hard physical labour rather than the bulging showy muscles acquired by bar-bells and regulated exercise.

The same day he moved into the Laurel Canyon apartment he told Jack Ward about being an actor. He now felt much closer to his new landlord, besides the bar manager was an inveterate viewer of TV crime shows and would be certain to spot Conrad when the *Crime Busters* film was broadcast. In addition, if Marvin Lurey was correct in his prediction of more work he might need time off should the shooting run into the night. Jack greeted the revelation in his usual fashion.

'Don't surprise me none. I always said you were a bum.'

'Well, now you know,' Conrad replied, relieved that his boss made no more of it.

'I hope you ain't plannin' on throwin' any of those wild Hollywood parties up here—with producers shootin' each other over some broken-head broad.'

Conrad laughed. 'It's hardly likely, Jack. I don't even know any producers.'

'I hope not. I had enough gunplay when I used to be

runnin' booze to last me for a lifetime. I come out here to relax.'

'Listen, Jack——'

'Yeah?'

'If you don't mind I'd rather you wouldn't say anything about this around The Raven. You know how they are.'

'Are you kiddin'? Jesus Christ, if I ever let a thing like this get out they'd laugh me out of the joint. Don't worry, I'll keep my trap shut.'

'Thanks, Jack.'

'You all set on the apartment now? Got everything you need?'

'I guess so. I think it's going to be swell. And, Jack—well, I just want to tell you I'm grateful for everything. I'll try to be as little trouble as I can.'

'Forget it' The bar manager scowled and started up the path to the main house. After a few steps he paused and then, as if reaching a decision of some sort, walked back towards Conrad. 'Listen, kid, I'd like to ask you a question, if I ain't bein' too nosy.'

'Go ahead.'

'Well, I've been out in this goddamn town for over five years. I've seen actors who should have been dishwashers and dishwashers who claimed they were actors but, so help me, God, you're the first guy I ever heard of who was an actor and didn't want to admit it—who wasn't buttonholin' everybody he met and tellin' them how great he was. Just tell me, how come?'

'I don't know, Jack.' Conrad was embarrassed at having to put a deep conviction into words. 'It's just that if I *am* an actor the people who are interested in it are going to find out soon enough, and the others don't care anyway.'

'That makes sense.' Ward nodded in agreement. 'I just wish more of them felt that way. How long have you been chippyin' around with this racket?'

'Practically all my life—ever since I grew up, anyway. Oh, I've done other things. You have to keep alive. But all the time I've really only been interested in the theatre. And get this, Jack'—Conrad's face took on a deadly serious cast—'I'm not ashamed of being an actor. It's a good profession. For thousands of years, through pestilence and famine and war, we've brought pleasure and entertainment to millions of people. In spite of the fact that, of all the trades in show business, it's invariably the actor who gets the dirty end of the stick. He's the last one to get paid and the first one to get fired. For years he was looked down on like a beggar or a thief, and even today ninety per cent of us don't make a living wage. I admit there are a lot of creeps in the business but I know some pretty weird bar-tenders, if it comes to that.'

Conrad stopped abruptly as he saw his boss regarding him with one of his rare smiles.

'Sorry, Jack, I didn't mean to deliver a lecture. But give the actor a break. It isn't all peaches and cream and Hollywood *premières*.'

'It's okay, kid,' Ward replied. 'I'm all for you. Whenever you want time off let me know. Just don't forget your friends when you're rich and famous.' He made a mock right cross at the actor's chin and walked up the path to the main house.

The new apartment was very comfortable and would have been a bargain, at much more than the nominal rent Jack was charging him. In the living-room there was a foam rubber couch and two Hardoy sling chairs with appropriate end and coffee tables. On one wall

leading away from the small but efficient fireplace, was a row of built-in bookcases, a tribute to the architect's belief in the literacy of chauffeurs. The walls themselves were done in knotty pine and the floors were solid planking. The kitchen, into which ran the stairway from the garage below, was small but adequate and well equipped. In addition to the main rooms there was a sun terrace adjoining the bedroom which led out to the pool.

It was not long after he was established in his new house that Joyce moved in with him, but the transition was so gradual as to be practically unnoticeable. From the beginning she came there often to tidy up and rearrange the apartment. Then she brought miscellaneous items of furniture to 'fill out the place', and books and records. Also, since she got in the habit of cooking meals for Conrad, she installed kitchen utensils. And, of course, spending several nights a week there it was only proper that she should provide herself with changes of clothing.

Then one afternoon they had taken the car into Hollywood, loaded up the remainder of her things and brought them back to the apartment. Conrad had tried to make an occasion of it, carrying her across the threshold. But she stiffened and fought him furiously until he was forced to put her down. Then, her usual good humour returned, she had told Conrad that if he wanted a ceremonial he should throw her into the swimming pool. He was in Hollywood now and he might as well do things in the proper manner. Before she could protest he had picked her up and dumped her into the pool, ignoring the fact that she was wearing one of her good dresses. When she floundered out sputtering with indignation Conrad grinned and told her all she had to do was hang it out to dry—it wasn't as if she had to wear

it home, or anything like that. Then she had laughed and thrown her arms around him, pressing her dripping body close to him. This time, without a protest, he had swung her up and carried her into the house.

So their relationship came to assume a pleasant pattern of domesticity. With the relinquishing of their practical bachelorhoods they became more mellow, more in love, and, above all, more dependent upon each other. The brittle, impudent irreverence, the principal defence mechanism of Joyce against a world which she felt to be hostile because of her fancied unattractiveness, changed to a warm femininity which was quite enchanting. For his own part Conrad came to enjoy a stability he had never known before, and his restless energy now was intensified into a desire to maintain his new home.

Jack and Sally took no exception to the new arrangement. Mrs. Ward and Joyce enjoyed the conventional neighbourly relationship of housewives, borrowing eggs and gossiping back and forth. Beyond an occasional glowering reference to the non-necessity of formal marriage, Jack himself ignored the irregularity of the situation. As neighbours the Wards were friendly and helpful. As landlords they were meticulously unobtrusive. An incident which occurred shortly after Conrad took the place typified his boss's attitude.

It was late one evening before Joyce had actually moved in when Conrad, who was sitting in the living-room reading, heard a piercing scream from the vicinity of the swimming pool. He had not been expecting Joyce, although she often came there without pre arrangement as a surprise to him. He rushed out to the terrace to discover Joyce standing naked in the time honoured pose of the frightened virgin, staring into the pool with horror-filled eyes. The night, though warm, was over-

cast and there was little light except for that coming from the open bedroom door. There was no disturbance in the water other than a concentric ring of ripples breaking away from the ladder where she stood. He snapped on the pool lights. Suddenly conscious of her nudity in the bright glare Joyce dashed into the apartment. Conrad went out to the edge of the pool and scanned the water. Right under the diving board, still floating, though somewhat water-logged, was a dead bird.

Joyce had apparently dived in and felt the sodden body. Not knowing what it was she had screamed in shock and terror. The bird was considerably bigger than a sparrow, the only California species with which Conrad had any familiarity. He went back to the terrace and got a long pole with net attached which they used to clean out the pool. Then, wielding the net like a cesta, he scooped out the body and threw it off into the woods. A light came on in the upper house. Conrad stood patiently, waiting for the window to open.

'What's the trouble?' Jack's voice rebounded off the water.

'A dead bird in the swimming pool.' Conrad felt foolish shouting it.

'What did you do with it?'

'I threw it back in the woods.'

'Okay,' Jack answered dryly before closing the window. 'It sure made a hell of a squawk when it died.'

Joyce and Conrad were happy. They had glorious days together in the warm California sunshine and on his evenings off they occasionally went out to dinner and a movie, or, once in a while, dancing. But more often they were content to simply sit at home, reading or talking, building a fire on the chillier evenings, revelling in their new-found bliss. One thing only marred Conrad's enjoy-

ment of this placid routine. This was the guilty knowledge that he was living a lie. For he had not yet confided to Joyce anything of his desire and efforts to make his career in pictures.

—He had by this time developed an imposing set of rationalizations—that he could not find an appropriate moment, that his paltry Broadway credits would have little impact on a girl raised in the film capital, that it would be time enough to tell her when it became apparent that he *was* actually making it, that in the final analysis it had nothing really to do with them as people. But deep inside he was afraid that once his movie aspirations were out in the open it would be the end for ever of the calm, contented, unambitious life they now shared. Of course, as many before him had learned, Conrad found that duplicity entails unforeseen problems. They were on a joint shopping spree when one of these contingencies arose.

One of their favourite activities, and one in which they indulged at least once a month, was to take a set sum of money saved expressly for this purpose and wander up and down the Boulevard shopping. They would spend an entire afternoon looking in store windows, roaming the aisles of dime and novelty stores, buying whatever nonsensical item happened to catch their fancy until all the money was gone. The gadgets they bought on these excursions were usually quite worthless in the context of ordinary housekeeping but the expeditions were always hilarious as each tried to outdo the other in impracticality. As Joyce pointed out, they could have spent a great deal more money in one of the gaudy Sunset Strip night spots without having nearly as much fun.

They were rummaging in one of the bigger chain

drug stores when Conrad spied Mennen Gilchrist at the cigarette counter. His neatly trimmed white moustache and imperious frown at the clerk from under his snap-brim Barrymore hat, bore an unmistakable stamp of his profession. Desperately, Conrad wished that the character man would not see him. He could hardly snub the man, especially in view of the fact that Gilchrist might have seen *Crime Busters* and would attribute the rebuff to Conrad's success, yet any conversation with him would be sure to centre on show business. And of one thing Conrad was sure. He didn't want the revelation of his true profession, when it did occur, to come through any such agency as Mennen Gilchrist.

Their eyes met, and for a horrified second he stood and stared at the older man. Then abruptly Gilchrist's eyes glazed and flickered past his. The old actor moved hastily out into the street, swinging his cane in an anxious parody of jauntiness. Conrad nearly laughed aloud in his relief. The character man had pretended not to see him because he did not have the five dollars to repay his loan. But Conrad turned to find Joyce eyeing him quizzically.

'Who was that?'

'Who?' Conrad stalled, embarrassed under her steady scrutiny.

'The man at the cigarette counter. He looked like he knew you. Do you know him?'

'Sort of. He's—he's a customer at the bar,' Conrad answered lamely, wondering as he did so why he continued the deceit.

'Funny he doesn't speak. What's the matter, does he owe a bill?' she asked with frightening insight.

'Yeah, that's right. He's in about five dollars.'

'I'll bet money he's an actor,' Joyce continued

positively. 'It's written all over him. Jack Ward must be getting soft in the head to be letting actors run up tabs. He's probably a dreadful ham to boot. Did you see that bit with the cane?'

And so in the face of her monumental scorn Conrad, writhing inwardly, once more postponed his confession.

There were other times too when his own pride in his trade almost gave him away. One such occasion was when they attended a movie together. Both Conrad and Joyce had excellent movie manners. They did not talk, nor eat noisy food, nor attempt to turn their loge seats into a parlour divan. But while Joyce enjoyed a picture purely for the entertainment value it afforded, Conrad viewed it dispassionately, professionally, wholly wrapped up in the acting and production technique involved, his only sign of unorthodoxy being an occasional chuckle in places obviously not meant to be funny. But when she half turned to him in question his face would once more be serious, his frown denoting rapt attention to the flickering shadows on the screen.

When the picture was over they went to a restaurant near the theatre for a snack. As sometimes happened, the two dimensional performances and the blatant appeal to the obvious in production sickened him and made him reluctant to discuss the film, although Joyce was chattering about it gaily, recalling scenes and asking his opinion.

'It was okay,' he said and bit into his sandwich.

But, although she herself couldn't have thought the picture nothing more than average, Joyce, for some perverse reason, annoyingly pursued the subject. She rhapsodized over hackneyed pieces of business and dialogue, particularly those involving the feminine lead, a reigning beauty whom Conrad thought especially horrific but

who had held her top position unchallenged for a number of years. Finally Conrad's brow knitted in an impatient frown.

'I'd like to know what ever gave that twot the idea she could act,' he rapped bitterly.

Joyce laughed uncertainly, somewhat taken aback by a vehemence which seemed out of all proportion to the point at issue. 'She doesn't have to act, silly. She's beautiful. What do you want? An egg in your beer?'

'Beautiful, balls!' he snapped back. 'What's beautiful about her? She looks exactly like every other leading woman in pictures. The only way you can tell the difference is by the colour of her hair—and that's subject to change without notice.'

And then, before he was quite aware of it, he was launched into a fierce diatribe on the standardized physical measurments of Hollywood which, in conjunction with billboards and magazines, had succeeded in proving that beauty *was* only skin deep, and that if a person didn't conform to the arbitrary standard he might just as well go out and shoot himself.

'Oh, no,' Joyce protested. 'All that might be true if you wanted to be a movie star. But we're just ordinary people.'

'But that's who it hurts the most.' He overruled her. 'The ordinary people are the ones who take the real beating. Every little high-school girl with mousy hair and bands on her teeth dreams of getting a Robert Taylor, just like every boy with pimples and scrawny arms can't see the girl next door because she hasn't got the exact requirements of Marilyn Monroe. But what happens? Their dreams are impossible to achieve so they get married and live miserably ever after because each of them figures he settled for second best.'

'But even the ones who marry each other aren't the worst off. They can always spend several hours a week at the movies reviving their dreams. It's the ones who won't settle for second best who really suffer. They either drink themselves to death or make a lot of money, and spend the rest of their lives with a conscience that won't leave them alone.' He lit a cigarette, striking the match furiously against the cardboard booklet. As he did so his eyes focused for a moment across the table on Joyce, who was regarding him with a tolerant smile.

'All\*right, you can laugh,' he went on. 'But what I say is the truth. The motion picture is one of the most insidious influences in modern American life, and it's come pretty near changing a reasonably ethical culture into an idolatrous one.'

'Oh, come on, Conrad. Aren't you making an awfully big production out of it? After all, they're only entertainers.'

'But they're *not* entertainers,' he fairly shouted. 'God-dam it, they're not! If they were there might be some excuse for it. But they're not! As entertainers they stink on ice, the whole damn bunch of them.'

'Since when did they make you a critic?' Joyce rejoined icily, becoming annoyed herself at what she felt to be his unreasonable attitude. 'Millions of people pay good money to see them, so at least they must *think* they're being entertained. Oh, I'm not so anxious to defend the movies but it does seem to me that you're hardly in any position to be running them down. It isn't as if you were Paul Muni, or somebody. You're just a bar-tender.' She grinned at him affectionately. 'But don't get me wrong, I love bar-tenders.'

Conrad subsided. He wanted to pound on the table, and tell her that he was not a bar-tender, by God, but an

actor—and a good one. But to reveal his true occupation now would merely put him in the position of a disgruntled failure tearing down those who were more able and fortunate than himself. He felt, however, that the things he had said about Hollywood, though violently spoken, were true objective judgements which sprang not from envy but from taste.

Thus the very secret he was so jealously guarding in hope of prolonging his happiness became the cancer which was working to destroy it. He became edgy and evasive. He tried to see that it was he who answered the phone first, who got any mail that might come. He would leap up to answer the doorbell should the caller have a connexion with his theatrical life. This latter experience was so frequent that he was even moved to voice one of his rare complaints about California customs.

‘God!’ he said irritably, after finally convincing a persistent peddler that he didn’t want any fresh strawberries. ‘People are always coming to the door out here.’

‘What do they do in New York?’ Joyce asked.

‘I don’t know. In the poorer neighbourhoods they stand out in the street and shout. In the rich neighbourhoods I guess it’s done by phone or mail.’

‘I don’t see what the difference is,’ she countered reasonably. ‘It’s the same bother either way.’

‘It isn’t all the same at all,’ Conrad snapped. ‘When the doorbell rings it should be something important. It’s hard to explain, but that’s the way I feel.’

Of course his eccentric behaviour could not escape Joyce’s notice for ever. Although she never referred to it, he had more than once surprised her regarding him with worried speculation. In short, it was becomingly increasingly apparent to him that he would not be able

to keep his secret much longer. But he still seemed incapable of summoning the resolution to tell her honestly and face the consequences, no matter how unpleasant they might be. Then something occurred, which he might have foreseen, and which forced the whole story into the open.

It was their evening to have Jack and Sally, together with another couple who were steady customers at The Raven and whom they liked very much, over for one of the regular poker games. Conrad had driven down the hill to pick up some liquor and things for the *hors-d'œuvres*. The instant he got back to the apartment he sensed that something was wrong, although Joyce was going about her preparations for the party in her customary casual efficiency. Conrad deposited the bottles and packages on the kitchen sink, then moved into the living-room where Joyce was bending over the collapsible poker table. He kissed her lightly on the back of the neck.

'Hello, Conrad.' Her voice was dangerously calm as she snapped open the folding legs. 'By the way, your friend Luke called.'

What with his job and the advent of Joyce, Conrad had seen very little of Luke Barney since the night of the big party. They had met once or twice for lunch and on a couple of evenings, before Joyce moved in, Conrad had gone out to the star's home for dinner as he had been accustomed to do when he first arrived in California. But lately they had kept up their friendship principally by telephone, with Conrad calling the star two or three times a week from The Raven. He had not said anything about Joyce to Luke nor had he mentioned Barney to her, for that would only involve a number of explanations he was not prepared to make.

The first time Joyce had gotten Luke on the phone was the day after she had moved into the apartment. Being new in the household she had not felt it her place to ask who he was and, although he knew she must be curious about the unfamiliar name, Conrad had passed it off lightly saying, merely, 'Thanks, I'll call him later.'

The two subsequent occasions when the star had called and Joyce had answered had been, though she said nothing, the signal for a strained withdrawal on the part of the girl. And each time Conrad had preserved the separateness of his two identities though his sense of guilt and shame had mounted. This time, he knew from the set line of her jaw, she was determined to demand an explanation of what, to her at least, must seem a disturbing and mysterious circumstance.

He braced himself as he watched her smooth the green felt of the table with a slim, absent hand.

'Just who is this mysterious Luke, anyway?' The question when it came had the jarring unreality of a stage line with which one has trouble and rehearses until it loses any meaning

'Well, I guess you might as well know the truth. It's a movie star. It's Luke Barney'

Whatever reaction he expected to this disclosure he was totally unprepared for what Joyce did. She laughed, great rolling bursts of hilarity. She sank into the Hardoy chair and rocked with laughter until the tears were rolling down her cheeks. Conrad, who had been girding himself for battle, experienced a bewildered let-down followed by a rising resentment that she should not grasp the seriousness of what he had told her.

'Well, it's not so funny as all that.'

Joyce crammed her fist in her mouth to choke off the

peals of mirth. Her colour was high and the green eyes glittered through their unaccustomed moisture.

'Not you, too! Dear God, say it isn't so.' And she was off again in uncontrollable merriment.

'I still don't see what's so goddam funny.' Conrad's voice rose in irritation. 'The guy's a good friend of mine.'

Perhaps sensing that he was on the verge of becoming really angry Joyce managed with some effort to control herself.

'Nothing, Conrad, except you were so cloak-and-dagger about it. It isn't any disgrace to know a star in Hollywood. Everybody has at least one. As a matter of fact, you're better off than most of the rest of us. *He calls you.*'

Conrad shook his head. 'It isn't only Luke. Knowing him, I mean. It's just that I haven't really been honest with you. Not that I've told you any lies. It's just that I haven't told you the whole truth.'

'Well, I don't see how it's too horrible.' She was still giggling, almost hysterically. 'Really, Conrad, if you knew the mental agonies I've gone through about that Luke. He's been everything from the FBI. to the head of the Mafia. After all, this is Hollywood. If I was digging that deep for explanations you ought to realize how disturbed I was. Now I find out that the mysterious Luke of my direst fantasies is nothing more sinister than a movie star. And you wonder why I laugh!'

Joyce was genuinely relieved. The tension had gone from the room and she went once more about her tasks, getting the cards and chips, gathering ash-trays for the table, her body moving in that loose free fashion he contrasted so favourably with the constant attitudinizing of other women.

He was tempted to leave the situation as it stood but now that he had started he must tell her everything.

Besides, the facile return to her former ease and affability perversely irked him.

'You've missed the point, baby,' he snapped.

Joyce turned from the table. Her eyes narrowed. 'I have? What is it?'

'The point is—well, it seems ridiculous to say it as if I was in a confessional—but the fact is, I'm an actor myself.' Conrad grabbed her by the arm. 'Now wait a minute. Before you go off into gales of laughter at *that*, I'd better tell you the whole story.'

Joyce was staring up at him as if he'd gone crazy and he wished he could get over the feeling that the whole thing was a scene from a bad play.

'I *am* a good actor.' The long overdue explanation tumbled from his lips in a rapid torrent. 'I'm not one of these stage-struck creeps from Central Casting who drives a cab and does extra work and talks about Darryl and Barney. I've been a professional actor for twenty years. All the other stuff I told you I've done was the truth—who ever heard of an actor making a living?—But all the time I've been an actor first and foremost. And all the time I've been learning my trade. But what's even more important, I've been learning about people. I know what makes them tick, what they want, and love, and hate. And because I know my craft I can bring that knowledge to an audience.'

Joyce barely listened to the stream of words which flowed from him as from a broken dam. During a lifetime in the movie capital she had heard the same phrases so often as to deprive them of any meaning for her. She knew the insecurity of the actor's life. Very few of them made a decent living, and even those who did were never sure how long their prosperity would continue. Joyce understood percentage, and a hundred dollars a week

for life was a better bet than a thousand a week for a year or two, with the balance of the time spent on the ragged edge of starvation. Then to hear her lover, this honest somewhat self-effacing man, whom she had watched tending bar in seeming indifference to the customers' endless misinformed chatter about the movies, suddenly claim membership in that hated world of exhibitionists and egomaniacs. She could not have been more surprised had Sam Goldwyn suddenly announced that he was a deep sea diver.

Then to her conditioned mind sprang all the questions which other actors of her acquaintance were always so eager to answer without solicitation—nor with a great deal of truth. What had he done? Had he worked for any of the majors? What was his salary? Who was his agent? *Is* he an actor or does he just want to be one? Joyce disengaged her arm from his firm grasp and sank wearily back into the sling chair.

'I guess you'd better start right at the beginning and tell me all about it,' she sighed

'It's much too long a story to explain before they get here.' Conrad jerked a thumb in the general direction of the Wards' house. 'I'll tell you after the game. I'll be glad to get it off my chest'

'Do Jack and Sally know you're an actor, honey? I wouldn't like to make a slip,' she said ironically, hurt and angry that he should have exploded this bombshell in the midst of their well ordered life.

Further discussion was forestalled by a knock at the door. Conrad moved rapidly to answer it, as if it was a late cue for which he had been waiting.

'Hi, folks, come on in,' he said with relieved heartiness, ushering in the Wards.

While Joyce and Sally dashed in and out of one

another's homes without knocking and the usual communications by Jack and Conrad were bellows which bounced off the swimming pool and ricocheted off into the woods, on poker nights formality was the rule. It gave each hostess—the three couples alternated weekly—a sense of entertaining, and the evenings in general had a festive, party sense.

Bill and Barbara came soon after and, following brief amenities, the six of them sat down to play.

Joyce took the game seriously and played with a ruthless slashing fervour which made her winnings—or losses, heavy. She won, however, much more than she lost, for her game was essentially sound, although not of the rock-bottom style of Conrad. Only one thing could tempt him from his consistent conservative tactics, which usually saw him emerge a modest winner, and that was a challenge by Jack Ward. On stud hands which had narrowed down to the two of them they would lock horns like bulls contesting the leadership of a herd, betting outrageously, often ending in a situation where each was bluffing the other and the hand was decided on high card. Sally understood the game but through her natural generosity failed to take advantage of the good hands she had, and frequently called bets she knew she had lost simply because her opponent was one of the losers. Bill played adequate army poker and had taught Barbara everything she knew about the game. She was, nevertheless, a considerably better player than he, a fact which by common consent was never mentioned.

There was little conversation, except pertaining to the game, and no one but Conrad seemed to notice the hostess's distraction. But when the alarm clock rang at the end of the session and Conrad straightened the bank it turned out that he had won eleven dollars and Joyce

had lost twelve. Bill and Barbara had lost a little over forty dollars between them, most of which had been won by Jack Ward in a phenomenal streak towards the end. They chatted for a while about the game and other indifferent matters until the remains of the cocktails were consumed, and the guests left. It was three-thirty.

'All right,' Joyce said, almost wearily. 'I suppose we have to go into this business of you being an actor.'

'Well, you don't have to sound so supercilious about it. I'm an actor. I've always been an actor. You ought to have known that's the only thing that could ever have dragged me out to this ridiculous town.'

'Great,' Joyce answered caustically. 'We're getting gobs of truth tonight, aren't we? You're an actor and you don't like California. Now maybe you'll tell me why all the elaborate secrecy. Didn't you feel you could trust me with such world-shaking information?'

'There's no need to be sarcastic, Joyce.' Conrad realized he was in the wrong but had difficulty restraining his temper under the lash of her tongue. 'I admit it's silly, but you seemed so prejudiced against show business when we first met that I didn't say anything about it. Then, later on, it—well, it just got harder and harder to tell you.'

Joyce was folding up the card table, snapping the legs angrily against the table top.

'You're sure it isn't because you thought your little plain-Jane car hop was too plain to meet your glamorous movie friends like Luke Barney?'

'That's not fair. Luke hasn't anything to do with it. He doesn't even know about you.'

'Precisely my point.'

'Be reasonable, honey. The reason I didn't tell you

before was because I was afraid. I just felt somehow that it would ruin everything between us. I couldn't say anything about it.'

'I don't know where you could have got that idea. It isn't as if you had a bastard child or something.' She shook her head impatiently. 'How can you expect me to accept a ridiculous explanation like that? No, Conrad, the whole thing's just too silly for words. You say you were afraid it would ruin everything between us. What do you suppose it's been like all this time knowing you were keeping something from me and not having the vaguest idea what it was? And, anyway, didn't you think I'd find out sooner or later—or are you so sure you're going to be a flop that you figured nothing would ever come out?'

'Not at all,' he retorted, stung by her sarcasm. 'There isn't any reason why I shouldn't make it out here—and make it big. My agent says——'

'You're an actor, all right,' she cut in bitterly. 'I'd recognize the material anywhere. "My agent says". God, if I hear that line one more time, I'll probably puke. Why don't you use the other old standby—"I was saying to my friend Luke Barney the other day, 'Luke,' I said——"'

'I don't know why you keep trying to drag Luke into this. He's nothing but a good friend of mine. He doesn't have anything to do with it. Hell, we used to be——'

'I know, you used to be broke together. Oh, Conrad, I've heard all this a million times before. He's such a good friend that you don't want to embarrass him, or yourself, in front of all his grand movie friends by showing up with your drab, dowdy—girl friend. Or steady nooky, however you want to refer to it.'

'Now, listen, Joyce——'

'Oh, what's the point in arguing about it? I'm tired and I'd like to get some sleep.'

She finished tidying up the house, emptying ash-trays with ferocious concentration while Conrad sat helplessly by. She was entitled to her anger, but the fact that she had fastened on such a total irrelevancy as Luke Barney made him feel all the more impotent in dealing with the situation. He followed her to the kitchen as she carried the cracker plates out. With deft brittle motions she rinsed them and stacked them alongside the sink. He watched her rigid back for a moment and then put his hands on her shoulders. She shrugged from under his grasp.

'Please, Conrad,' she said coldly.

'Oh, look, honey.'

She ignored his entreaty and went back into the living-room. When he followed her he saw that she was pulling blankets and pillows from the hall closet.

'What's that for?' he asked, knowing full well. 'Can't we talk this over?'

'I'm going to sleep on the couch,' she replied levelly. 'If you really think there's anything to be gained by talking it over, let's wait until morning.'

'All right,' he said in resignation. 'But there's no reason why you shouldn't have the bed. I'll sleep on the couch.'

'That wouldn't be right. It's your house.'

'Oh, for the love of God, Joyce!' he shouted. 'Let's not get childish.'

'You're a fine one to talk about being childish,' she retorted coldly. 'But then I guess I should realize the things you say only apply to other people, not yourself. For example, I recall a fine speech you once made me about modern morality and how it frowned on promis-

cuity and deceit. Deceit! Good Lord, I think you *invented* it! Oh, yes, you're an actor all right. Nobody but an actor could be so completely phony.'

Viciously she threw the blankets down on the couch and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Dawn was breaking when Conrad finally dropped off into a troubled sleep. Outside there was a red glow in the east as the sun rose over the mountainside, and the morning was alive with a chorus of warbling birds. It was going to be another beautiful day.

# 11

THE sun was shining down hot and bright. His mouth was furry and there was a crick in the back of his neck from the doubled soft pillow. He rubbed his gummy eyes, seeking orientation to the world of wakefulness. As the events of the past evening rushed back he glanced fearfully at the bedroom door. It stood ajar. He listened for sounds of occupancy in the apartment. There was silence; even the birds outside had given up their singing in the midday heat. He shook his head vigorously, went to the kitchen, and drank milk, cold and refreshing, from the mouth of the cardboard container. He slammed the refrigerator and then went back into the living-room. After a silent wait he folded his rumpled blankets and the crushed pillow together and stuffed them into the hall closet. Then with palpable hesitation he pushed open the bedroom door.

The room was empty but two suitcases were laid out partially packed, the remainder of Joyce's clothes still hanging in their accustomed place in the closet. A cursory inspection showed nothing missing as yet. He passed through it into the bathroom. His clothes, which he had slept in, were wrinkled and acid with perspiration. He kicked them into a corner of the bathroom and returned to the bedroom for his dressing-gown. She might have gone shopping and would return by the time he was out of the bathroom. He dawdled over his shower and shave as children try vainly to forestall time with

physical objects, such as squares of a sidewalk or white-washed picket laths.

When finally he stowed away his shaving gear, the apartment was the same, the bedspread a smooth and unbroken surface. The living-room and kitchen smelled of stale liquor and tobacco. That her clothes remained proved nothing. If she planned to move out she would probably do so while he was at work. She would rather not chance waking him with the bustle of moving when she could return after he had left for the job. Joyce and Conrad had never agreed on the respective definitions of discussion and argument.

He scanned the dressing-table carefully to determine how much make-up Joyce had taken with her. But the clusters of jars and bottles arrayed on either side of the mirror afforded no clue as Joyce's make-up most frequently consisted of a lipstick which could be easily carried in her pocket.

He felt his way around the room, as if by her tangible possessions he could force her physical presence. He touched the combination clock-radio he had given her as a moving-in present. She was one of those people who found it unpleasant waking in the mornings. The gold hands and highly modernistic dial made it difficult to read from any distance, specially when the light was wrong. Closer, he saw that it was one-thirty. He had been awake since noon. If she had gone down the canyon shopping she should have been back by now.

Conrad stepped out on to the sun terrace. The pool was a bright light blue, of colloidal opacity as the rays of the sun were diffused by the chemically treated water. On the terrace the canvas deck chairs stood listless and inanimate and on the white-enamelled metal table an ice tray contained lifeless stagnant squares of water. From

the main house above he heard the sudden insistent clatter of the television set. He strode up the path towards the sound.

As he approached he was able to identify the programme by the cloying, insistent voice of its moderator. It was a daytime give-away show which extolled its own charity and exacted nothing from the recipients save overt maudlin gratitude which made 'good colour' or 'human interest'. Conrad had often speculated on Sally's fondness for these coaxial caterwaulings, for the people involved in them seemed as unattractive as they were uninteresting. Maybe these programmes were another manifestation of the violent thoroughness with which she had assumed the housewife role following her marriage to Jack. He found it hard to conceive of 'Friend In Deed' having much appeal for an active practitioner of the oldest profession.

Sally used the television set all day as she would a radio, moving from room to room to do her household chores. When a favourite programme was on she would pause in front of the set, dust cloth clutched in her hand, absorbed until the advent of the commercial. During less gripping offerings she went about her regular tasks seemingly content to hear the familiar voices from the living-room. She claimed she could tell exactly what was going on by listening, an incisive commentary on the static camera work of this newest medium of entertainment.

Because he knew she would not hear his knock over the blare of the set, he opened the back screen door and entered the kitchen.

'Sally,' he called, and walked into the living-room. She was watching a tuxedoed M.C. pinning an orchid on an incredibly old woman and demanding that she 'pucker up' so that he might kiss her. That the old lady

obviously did not want to kiss him served only to increase his insistence and add still more decibels to the delighted howls of the feminine studio audience.

'Is that you, Conrad?' Sally said over her shoulder, keeping her eyes on the screen. Now the old lady, taking the line of least resistance, suffered herself to be kissed on the cheek. During an hysterical burst of applause she was presented with a wrist-watch, the virtues of which the announcer pointed out with church-social gaiety. Sally turned around.

'Is that you, Conrad?' she repeated. She was wearing a quilted house-coat. A brilliant scarf covered her hair, with the exception of a symmetrical row of blonde curls pinned tightly down on her forehead like a line of impaled snails.

'Yeah,' he answered, fighting an urge to shut off the television set. 'How you feeling today?'

'All right—*now*.' Sally gave her open, friendly laugh. 'It's a miracle though, considering all the liquor we put away last night. I bet we drank you out of house and home and you've come up to bum a little hair of the dog?'

'Well, not exactly.' She was obviously unaware of any trouble between Joyce and him and her attention focused on the 'ladies' in the television audience, who now were singing 'For He's A Jolly Good Fellow', in honour of the oily voiced M.C.

'But you'll have one anyway, huh?' Sally backed reluctantly to the bar. 'How about a screwdriver? That's almost harmless and besides you get some breakfast too.' She poured a good-sized portion of vodka into a tumbler and went to the kitchen to get some orange juice. Feeling like a sneak thief Conrad turned the volume on the television down slightly.

'Here you go, Conrad. Happy days.' She thrust the tumbler into his hand.

'What about you?' Conrad asked, seeing only one glass.

'No can do.' Sally shook her head. 'If I started lushing now I'd never make it through to dinner. Go ahead, drink it up. You'll feel better.'

'Cheers,' Conrad said, and sipped the drink.

'You don't mind if I go on with my work?' Sally asked with a preliminary tug at the house-coat. 'Just make yourself at home, watch TV, if you want another drink you know where it is.'

'As a matter of fact, I can't stay long. I just came up to find out if you'd seen Joyce.'

'Not since last night. Why, has she disappeared?' Her laugh showed how far-fetched any such idea was to her.

'Oh, nothing like that.' Conrad hoped his light response was equally convincing. 'I slept late this morning and when I woke up she was gone. I just wondered if she came up here.'

'No. I haven't seen her since last night,' Sally said blithely. 'She probably just went shopping.'

'Yeah, I guess that's it.' Conrad finished the screw-driver, followed Sally out to the kitchen and put the empty glass in the sink. 'Yeah, that's probably it,' he said again. 'Thanks for the drink, Sally. I'll see you later.'

Joyce was not in the apartment when he returned. He took a pack of cigarettes from the kitchen cabinet and descended the stairs to the garage. The little red Ford was gone. He got into his own car and raced the motor while he lowered the top. He tooted down the canyon road, taking the turns with automatic precision, as he contemplated his situation.

In many ways it was not a unique one. Women before had moved out with the same lack of ceremony—even his final split with his wife was of an abrupt nature. But he had never cared more than they and so it was an easy matter to exercise a masculine pride which precluded running after them. Now the tables were turned, for he was desperately anxious to seek her out. But directly upon the heels of this determination came a shocked reminder that he knew as little of Joyce's habits before he met her as she knew of his. The mutual attraction was strong, and their relationship had formed so rapidly that they had virtually no past together. And, he thought grimly, maybe no future either. For, although he wanted to find her and effect a reconciliation, he hadn't the vaguest idea where to begin his search.

At The Raven he found no one but the regulars, engaged in the inevitable game of liar's poker. He returned their greetings and had a beer. After some persuasion he joined in the game for a few hands but could not keep his mind on the play. He ordered another beer and, excusing himself from the game, went back to the phone booth. He called the apartment, letting the phone ring eight times before he hung up. Then, in case he had inadvertently dialled the wrong number, he called again. There was still no answer.

He resumed his stool at the end of the bar and, waiting for a break in the play, called Jack over. The manager grinned exultantly and raised a foot to display a pair of bright blue leather loafers equipped with tassels instead of ordinary laces.

'Thanks for the kicks, kid. I went out and bought 'em at lunch time.'

'Don't thank me. I didn't lose any money. Bill and Barbara paid the bill.'

'Well, that's better than nothing. Only my feet would feel a lot better if they were walking on your dough. What's on your mind?'

'I want the night off.'

'Oh? Got a show?' Although Jack had scrupulously kept his promise not to reveal Conrad's career to the customers of the bar, the manager himself had taken an almost proprietary interest in it

'No,' Conrad answered. 'I'm going to go out and get drunk.'

'You are, huh?' Jack asked belligerently, and waited for Conrad's reply. The actor said nothing, so Jack went on. 'What do you mean *out*? What's wrong with right here? We can always use the dough.' Then, sensing something out of the ordinary in Conrad's failure to rise to the bait and reply in kind, he lowered his growl. 'What's the matter? Trouble at home?'

'Jack, I think Joyce is going to leave.'

'She is?'

'I think so. If she hasn't left already.'

Jack gave a low, almost soundless whistle. 'Everything was all right last night, wasn't it?'

'No, that's when it started. She found out about my being an actor.'

'I ain't surprised. You know what I think of actors,' Jack said in a half hearted attempt to distract Conrad. Then seriously, 'But that doesn't seem like reason enough for her to take a powder.'

'Well, we had quite an argument,' Conrad told him morosely, and recounted its highlights, indicating that her rage seemed to spring not so much from dislike for his profession but from a feeling that he was ashamed to present her to Luke Barney and other friends. When Jack seemed unable to grasp this Conrad explained to him

something of the girl's background and her consequent conviction that she was unattractive.

'You mean she thinks you're chippyin' on her?' Jack asked bluntly.

This was a natural question from Jack but it presented a new possibility to Conrad who, in his very innocence, had never imagined she might have doubts about his fidelity as well.

'I don't know what she thinks,' he answered, suddenly struck with the complete truth of the statement.

'You haven't been, have you?' Jack asked.

'Don't be silly,' Conrad replied impatiently. 'Joyce is enough woman for any man. Besides, I don't play that way.'

'I still don't see what good gettin' drunk is gonna do you,' Jack said flatly. 'You can have the night off, but if I was you I'd get my ass in gear and try to find her.'

'That's just it, Jack. I haven't the remotest idea where to look.'

'You say she left all her clothes in the apartment. She's got to get them some time, don't she? Why don't you go home and wait for her to show up and try to talk her out of kissin' you off?'

'What's the good in that?' Conrad asked heatedly, suddenly ashamed of the weak-sister specimen he was making of himself. To sit in a darkened apartment all night waiting for a girl to arrive so that he might surprise her in the act of removing her own belongings was not his idea of manhood. 'If she's made up her mind to leave, she'll leave. Sure, I acted like a damn fool but she acted like just as big a one. I'll come home tonight just like I always do. If she's there, swell. If she isn't, that's just my tough luck. She's a big girl now and she ought to know her own mind without any help from me.'

'Okay.' Jack sensing the despair beneath the other's bravado resumed his habitually sour tone. 'I always say a guy should take his own best shot. I think you're crazy but you can have the night off. Only forget what I said about spendin' it here. I don't think I could stand the sight of you cryin' in your beer for another four hours. Got any loot?'

'Yeah, I have enough. Thanks, Jack—and all this stuff I told you, just forget it, huh?'

'What stuff?' Jack asked, wrinkling his brow in fierce perplexity. 'I got troubles enough of my own.' And the sympathy he was unable to state he put in a playful right cross to the actor's chin. 'Go on, beat it, you bum.'

# 12

THERE were only two places where Conrad could think to look for Joyce and neither of them were of any avail. No one at the drive-in had seen her since she quit her job, shortly after moving into the Laurel Canyon apartment. The girl with whom she had lived when Conrad met her had left the building entirely, leaving no forwarding address. Now completely at loose ends he drove aimlessly out Sunset towards the beach. In Beverly Hills he pulled into a service station and called the apartment once more. Again there was no answer. He fished the dime from the coin return, hesitated a moment, and then called Luke Barney. The maid answered the phone.

In the pause that followed while she went to call Luke, he was tempted to hang up and forget all about it. True, the star was his closest friend in the city, but that was no excuse for usurping his time with personal woes. Conrad himself had often deprecated Hollywood's readiness to air loudly and publicly its marital squabbles and disaffections. Working at The Raven afforded ample opportunity to observe sordid details of a ruptured love life being poured into the handiest ear, even that of the most casual acquaintance.

'Hallo.'

'Hi, Luke. This is Conrad, but then you know that, don't you?'

'Brother, I'm glad you called. I tried to get in touch with you last night. Did you get the message?'

'Yes. Yes, I did.'

'Some chick answered the phone and it sounded like the same one I've got a couple of times before. Conrad, have you been holding out on me?'

'Not really. I don't think it's anybody you'd go for.' Conrad felt a guilty twinge as he recalled Joyce's words of the night before. Yet it was true. Judging by the monotonous conformity of Luke's girls there was no reason to suppose Joyce's fresh, natural appeal would interest the star at all. And that, he reflected bitterly, was a compliment, though Joyce would have taken it as a further indication that he was ashamed of her.

'What's the matter?' Luke was saying 'You sound kind of down in the mouth.'

'Nothing really.'

'Are you doing anything this afternoon?'

'Nothing special.'

'Then I wish you'd come up. That's why I called you last night. And listen, don't feel beat because when you hear what I've got to tell you it ought to snap you right out of it.'

'What's that?' Conrad asked mechanically, too wrapped up in his own thoughts of Joyce to register the excitement in the star's voice.

'I'll tell you when you get here. How soon will you be?'

'Well, I'm in Beverly Hills now——'

'Okay, make it snappy.' concluded Luke, and hung up.

Turning into the driveway of the Topanga Canyon home Conrad was reminded of the first time he had visited there back in early spring. The surrounding tangle of foliage was browner and thinner now, just as he was. He went straight back to the swimming pool. Luke was lying on his back on the concrete bank. Tight white nylon trunks gleamed against his nut-brown body. He raised

himself to one elbow as Conrad approached and waved negligently.

'Hi, Con. It's really hot today, isn't it? Why don't you grab some trunks and come on in?'

Conrad nodded acquiescence. In the changing-room he selected a pair of dark blue Jantzens from the several suits hanging in one of the lockers. Again recalling his first visit to the star's home he reflected melodramatically that he had got nothing from California since then but a sun-tan and a broken heart. He ran out to the pool, hitting the cold water with a running dive. He swam vigorously for a minute or so, until his body became accustomed to the cooler temperature, then pulled himself from the pool to lie dripping beside his friend.

'That does feel good,' Conrad said, momentarily refreshed. He brushed the excess moisture from his body with the flats of his hands and lay back as the sun sucked up the remaining wetness like a huge burning sponge. Rather absently Luke did several back push-ups, lifting his biggish body without any seeming effort. Luke was almost incapable of relaxing for any length of time without interspersing some sort of physical exercise. Even while sitting at his desk attending to his fan mail the star had a habit of doing hand and wrist manipulations.

'Where the hell have you been?' Luke turned on his side and regarded Conrad with a friendly smile. 'I was beginning to think you were sore or something.'

'Well, I've been kind of busy. They released the *Crime Busters* film I did, and I've been getting some more work.'

'Yeah, I know. I saw. Good, too.' Luke rubbed his chin judiciously. 'You have some things to learn about picture technique, but that's a breeze.'

'I thought you didn't like television,' Conrad said,

pleased that the star had been sufficiently interested to watch his show.

'I don't,' Luke replied decisively. 'But I had to see my boy, didn't I?'

'Well, that's more than I did. I haven't even seen it myself.'

'You haven't?'

'No, I had to work.'

'You must have a great boss,' Luke said sarcastically.

'No, Luke, he's a swell guy. He gives me plenty of time off whenever I need it. That's one reason I don't like to ask him unless it's necessary. As a matter of fact, I should be working tonight.'

Luke Barney grunted and flopped over on his stomach exposing a broad, muscled back to the hot sun. He cradled his head in his arms, facing Conrad.

'Tell me about your girl,' he said.

'There's nothing to tell,' Conrad answered shortly. But then, since Luke had initiated the subject, Conrad could not resist confiding in him. 'Besides, I don't think she's my girl any more.'

'Oh-oh!' Luke's eyes widened sympathetically. 'You mean you had a fight?' Conrad nodded. 'It must be kind of serious. She always seemed to be there when I phoned.'

'She lives there. Or she did until today.'

'I see.'

'You don't see.' Conrad sat up. 'You don't see at all! God damn it, Luke, I'm in love with the girl and now she's moving out, all because of a silly misunderstanding.'

'In love, huh? That makes it more complicated,' Luke said easily. 'I was going to suggest that you just talk it over with her and clear it up - that is if you want to.'

'It isn't as easy as all that. She thinks I think she isn't

pretty. It's the sort of misconception you can't clear up with talk.'

'Boy, that's a new one. What the hell does she suppose you're doing sleeping with her every night—or does she think you're a masochist?'

'There's more to it than that.' For the second time that day Conrad recounted the brief history of his relationship with Joyce including her reaction to Luke himself. When he was through the star sat up and gazed at him with open astonishment.

'Look, buddy, you must be out of your mind. That girl sounds to me like a first-class flip.'

'Well, you're wrong,' Conrad countered with heat. 'Joyce is a very intelligent, well-balanced girl. It's just that her mother has been mixed up with the lousy movies for so long it's a wonder she hasn't got even stranger notions.'

'Okay, okay!' Luke raised a defensive palm. 'Don't get sore at me about it. But what's her objection to actors? Everybody's an actor to some degree. Every human being has some personality other than his real self which he presents to the outside world. If that isn't acting I'd like to know what is. The only difference with us is that we make an honest living that way. Hell, we're *more* genuine than the insurance salesman with his bum parlour tricks or the auto mechanic who knocks his friends out with dirty toasts and limericks.'

'I know all that, Luke,' Conrad said impatiently. 'The trouble is I didn't tell her in the first place and now she's put the wrong construction on *why* I didn't. I was afraid of losing her, but she thinks it was because I was ashamed of her.'

'You sound like you've really got it bad.'

'I have. Honest to God, I feel like a high school kid.'

Conrad stopped, looking for words to explain how much Joyce actually meant to him. 'I don't know how to say it, Luke. But just remember the most you were ever in love and multiply——'

'I've *never* been in love,' Luke interjected flatly. 'At least, not the way you're talking about. When I was younger, and it's supposed to happen, I was too busy worrying about my career. I've never told anyone else before, but the main reason I married Stella was because I figured if I had something at home waiting for me I wouldn't be dissipating the energy I needed for the theatre out chasing tail. It didn't work out that way, but that's how I had it figured. Now that I've got the career I'm too damn busy holding on to it . . . and well, I haven't met anybody I really like. Besides, the more I see of women the less I respect them. Every goddam one of them wants something. The more subtle they are the longer it takes them to ask for it, but in the end it always comes out. I'd rather stick to the good old Four Fs—and the most important of those is "Forget 'em."'

'Uh-uh, Luke,' Conrad demurred. 'I used to think that way—at least to a modified degree. But you'll never find real happiness that way.'

'Happiness? Balls!' Luke retorted. 'What the hell are you talking about happiness for? You come up here with your tail between your legs and your chin dragging the ground and have the nerve to tell me I'm not happy. Well, maybe I'm not. But I'm not singing the blues either. I'm content most of the time and contentment is all anybody has a right to ask out of this world. At least I don't have to worry whether any of my women are out screwing somebody else. They probably are, but I don't give a damn. I'll screw anybody else's woman, so I haven't got any reason to beef if they screw mine.'

'That's not the point,' Conrad said angrily. 'I'm not worried about Joyce along those lines.'

'Well, maybe you're right, if she's ugly,' Luke agreed reasonably. 'It's the pretty ones who are less apt to be virtuous. If they're unfaithful to some guy and he leaves them they can usually go out and get another one. They don't have an all or nothing choice.'

It was useless. Luke was congenitally incapable of regarding women as individual persons, but rather as a species which was divided into families and types whose behaviour and patterns were predictable. And any reply of Conrad's would have been wasted, for Clara was approaching from the house.

'Hallo, Mr Eldred.' She greeted him pleasantly, then turned to her employer. 'Lunch is ready, Mr Barney. Do you want me to serve it out here?'

Luke inspected his body impersonally, as a cook does a roast in the oven. 'No, Clara, I think I've had enough sun for the day. Set it up in the bar. We'll be there in a couple of minutes.'

The maid nodded assent and moved with her dignified walk back to the house.

'She's wonderful,' Luke said, following the retreating figure with his eyes. 'Everywhere I go out here people are bitching about the servant problem. All they have to do is pay them a decent salary and treat them like human beings. Come on, I'll race you across the pool.'

To Conrad's delight he pulled up at the other end of the tank slightly ahead of the star. Luke shook his head, throwing a spray of water, then dug a finger into his ear. He grinned, his teeth flashing whitely against mahogany skin.

'You move right along in that water, sport. You're in

better condition now than when you first got here, in spite of yourself.'

'I have a swimming pool of my own now. I'm in practice.'

In the beach house they towelled off rapidly, Luke donning jeans and a sweat shirt. Clara had set up a folding table in the bar. There was a mixed green salad garnished in bright pink shrimps and paler lobster with two ice-cold bottles of beer and frosted steins. Luke sat at the table and began to divide the colourful meal. Conrad stood in the doorway watching him.

'Would you mind if I used the phone, Luke?' he asked. 'I won't be a minute.'

'Help yourself,' the star replied through a mouthful of salad. 'But make it snappy or you may leave here hungry.'

Conrad went into the adjoining office and called home but, as he had expected, there was no answer. Disconsolately he returned to the table and began eating.

'No luck yet?' Luke asked sympathetically.

'No,' Conrad replied. 'But if she's going to move out I don't suppose she'll do it until she thinks I'm at work.'

'Tell me something, Conrad,' Luke said curiously. 'Is she really so unattractive?'

'You'll meet her if I ever get this thing straightened out,' Conrad answered. 'Then you can judge for yourself. I think she's very beautiful.'

'But *she* doesn't,' the star went on pedantically. 'You know, Con, no man can fully realize what it does to a woman not to be pretty. The average man never realizes that most women would rather have a wolf whistle than the Hope diamond. If more men understood this, there'd be a hell of a lot less divorce in the world.'

'You may have a point there, Luke,' Conrad said.

‘Sure, you can never compliment a woman too much. Even if you don’t mean it she’s got to think you do. And if you really *do* mean it, why not say it?’

This was all right for Luke who, since he gave women no more importance than pawns in a life-size war game, felt any strategy permissible that would insure victory. But Conrad had always been reticent about disclosing his feelings. He was awkward with honeyed phrases, for fear that they be taken as false efforts to ingratiate himself.

‘But I’ll tell you one thing, Con.’ Luke was pursuing the topic. ‘It isn’t up to me to be handing out advice, but if you don’t at least try to talk to her and reach some sort of understanding, you’ll be kicking yourself in the backside for the rest of your life—not that you won’t be anyway if you make it up and get married. You didn’t do anything so terrible.’

‘Very funny. It’s okay for you to sit there making wise-cracks. It isn’t what I did that’s important. It’s *why* she thinks I did it. My God, the real reason is so corny I wouldn’t even believe it myself.’ Nervously, Conrad pushed his chair back from the table and stood, leaning on the end of the bar.

‘Well,’ Luke shrugged. ‘You’ll do what you want to. All I can say is you ought to *try* to explain it to her.’

‘Okay, Luke, what do you say we drop it,’ Conrad answered with some asperity. ‘I’m sorry I brought the thing up in the first place.’

‘Hey now, don’t get sore at me about it.’ Luke rose from the table with a friendly smile and put his arm around Conrad’s shoulder. ‘There’s no woman in the world worth two guys getting in a fight over. Wasn’t it old Ben Franklin who said all cats are grey in the dark? Forget it, poppa, and let’s have a drink.’ He reached behind the bar for the bourbon bottle, glancing slyly at

Conrad over his shoulder. 'I've got a hunch you're going to need one.'

'I am? Why?' Conrad regarded his friend with an absent frown.

'Brother! If you don't win the mink-lined Oscar! Haven't you any curiosity about why I wanted to see you this afternoon?'

'To tell you the truth it had slipped my mind,' Conrad replied listlessly. 'What with this trouble with Joyce and——'

Luke Barney pounded his fist on the table. 'God damn it, Conrad!' he shouted. 'Will you forget that silly bitch for just a moment! This is important.'

'Okay, Luke, what is it?'

'Well,' the star began, 'you remember what I said on the boat right after you got to town? I told you it was almost impossible for one actor to help another?'

'Yeah, I remember. But I told you then——'

'Do me a favour,' Luke cut in 'Please don't interrupt. These questions are purely rhetorical. Okay?'

'Okay, but——'

'No buts Just listen for a minute or two.' The leading man took a long slow pull at his drink rolling it around on his tongue first, savouring the taste not only of the liquor but also the news he was about to impart. There was the same teasing expression on his handsome features a father wears when there is a new fishing rod hidden in the garage for a birthday. He began to be interested in what Luke Barney was saying.

'Okay, I said it was impossible for one actor to help another, and ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that's true. But something came up. My next picture for Millic is going to be a western—not a one horse, two set deal, but a real epic. We're going on location in New Mexico.

In fact we'd be there already, except there was a hitch in the production. And that's where you come in.'

'You mean there might be a part in it for me?' Conrad was now thoroughly alert.

'There sure as hell might!' Luke said triumphantly. 'Let me give you the background. There's a good heavy part—the main villain, runs all the way through the picture—and Millic wanted Jerry Delos. You know Jerry?'

'No, I don't.'

'He's a hell of a good actor, only he's flip as they come. A real weird-o. Anyway, Millic signed him but all of a sudden the guy decides he's too crazy to work. It's funny how crazy these guys get as soon as they have a few bucks in the bank. Anyway, Jerry goes to some witch-doctor who tells him he can't stand the emotional disturbance of working in pictures any more. He ought to take an intensive analysis for at least a year—at twenty-five bucks a visit to the doctor, naturally. So Delos goes off into hiding somewhere, the production is held up, it's costing Millic and the studio thousands of dollars a day to keep the crew, and Millic is screaming blue murder but there's nothing he can do because the doctor's word is enough to break the contract. Then the east coast talent representative comes up with some guy who is now in a New York play. They run some tests of the guy back east and shoot them out here to Millic. He okays them and tells the east coast to sign the actor. But it turns out the actor has a run of the play contract and his show won't release him. By this time Millic is in a first-class tizzy.'

The star paused and took another drink before adding parenthetically, 'I know all this because I was out to the studio to needle him about why the picture hasn't got under way. After all, it doesn't do me any good to sit

on my can for too long a stretch. Besides, it's more or less common knowledge if you read the trades. Anyway, he was telling me this long tale of woe and it suddenly occurred to me, why not my boy, Conrad?'

'I don't know—Luke——' Conrad began.

'I said no interruptions. Well, the story is this. Millic's nobody's fool. He likes the idea of an unknown, but in Hollywood "unknown" means somebody who has only done about twenty pictures. Sure, he was willing to sign a Broadway actor, but the guy *is* in a hit play *now* so the studio might be able to siphon off some of that prestige. But the picture has to be done and done soon. I told him I knew you were good, what did he have to lose, all the standard arguments. So, to make a long story short, he's agreed to take a look at your *Crime Busters* film.'

'But that's already been shown,' Conrad protested. 'How can he see it now?'

'Once you make a piece of film in this town it becomes public property, like government records. All he has to do is call up the producers and tell them he wants to see such and such *Crime Busters*. Don't ever think they won't break their balls to get it to the great Millic. As a matter of fact it will be delivered here Tuesday night by messenger.'

'Here? I guess I don't follow.'

'That's why I was so anxious to get in touch with you. Sure, he could have run it off at the studio but there would have been a million people running in and out, bothering him with this and that. He probably wouldn't have seen half of it. I figure if I show it in my projection room and he's sitting there in the dark with a full glass of scotch in his hand at least you'll get a fair shake. So I invited him up Tuesday for a little gathering.'

Conrad was dumbfounded. 'Luke, I—I really don't know what to say. I mean, how can I thank you?'

'You don't have to thank me. If you get this part we'll be working together, just like old times. Can you be here on Tuesday night?'

'Sure, but——'

'No buts. Just be here. And another thing. Call your agent . . . Lurey?' Conrad nodded dazedly. 'Well, call Lurey and explain the pitch to him. Tell him he has to be here too. And don't let him stall you by saying he has somewhere else to go. If you get this job it will mean a good-sized commission for him, not to mention a red-hot client. There's just a chance we can swing the whole thing all at one time.'

'Luke, I just don't know what to say to thank you. I——'

'I thought I told you to forget it. Have a drink and let's keep our fingers crossed.'

'Mr Barney,' Clara said tentatively, as she was clearing away the lunch dishes.

'Yes, Clara, what is it?'

'Don't you think you'd better be getting ready?'

'Ready? Oh, God, yes!' Luke was suddenly galvanized into action. He stripped off his sweat shirt and dashed into the bedroom. 'I almost forgot I have an interview with some woman who writes for a fan magazine this afternoon. With luck I'll just make it.'

Conrad, still overwhelmed by the opportunity Luke was making possible, followed the star into the room where he was whipping into a suit Clara had laid out for him.

'I'm going to take off, Luke. I'll be here Tuesday.' Then, realizing the inadequacy of his words, he mumbled, 'I—I want to get off by myself and digest this.'

**'Okay, pal.' His friend was standing in front of the mirror, his jaw set in an effort to make an even knot in his necktie. 'Be sure you call Lurey. Better do it today so he has as much notice as possible.'**

**'I will, Luke.'**

**The star winked at Conrad in the mirror. 'And if you get straightened out with your girl friend, bring her along. I'd like to take a look at her.'**

# 13

It was dark when Conrad arrived at the apartment. The California sun suddenly plunged itself into the ocean leaving not the least stream of twilight to mark its extinction. His first sight upon entering was the partially filled suitcases. Nothing had changed since he went out early that afternoon. There was nothing to do but wait—wait and ponder the strange fate which had let two such momentous events occur on the same day. When his spirits lifted at the prospect of obtaining a big part, which might signal the start of a long successful movie career, they were plummeted to the depths once more as he contemplated losing Joyce. Conversely, his problem with the girl lost its proper seriousness in the heady wine of possible fame and fortune. Thus, even while facing the uncertain wait for Joyce he remembered to call Lurey.

'Hallo.' The agent answered the phone himself, his secretary apparently having gone for the day.

'Hallo. This is Conrad Eldred. I guess I'm lucky to catch you in so late.'

'Not at all.' Lurey was expansively cordial. 'This is the only time to get me. I keep office hours when everybody else has gone home. During the day I'm in other peoples' offices. How would I get you any work if I sat here on my tokas all day?'

He explained briefly Luke Barney's plan in regard to Millic.

'What did I tell you?' The agent was exultant.

'Socialize! I hope you realize how lucky we are. I knew he was having trouble with that picture and, frankly, I was thinking of recommending you. Of course, you've never done any pictures. But with a set-up like this we might just pull it off.'

'Then you'll come on Tuesday?' Conrad asked.

'Try to keep me away. I'll be there all right, don't worry. I'll be there, babydoll, and what's more I'll have a contract already drawn up in my pocket.'

'Well——' Conrad interposed dubiously.

'Listen, let me handle this. Millic's a great producer, Conrad, and he always knows what he wants. Furthermore he's the kind of man who can make up his mind on the spot. If he likes your film we ought to be ready to close the whole deal right then and there. So long. See you Tuesday.'

'Hey, wait a minute,' Conrad said quickly, before the man could hang up. 'Don't you want to know where it is?'

'You said Luke Barney's house, didn't you? I know where Luke Barney lives. I know where everybody lives. What the hell do you think I've been doing in Hollywood all this time, sitting on my thumb? See you on Tuesday.'

Laymen believe stage fright to be the main disagreeable emotional experience through which the actor passes, but it is child's play compared to the dread, hopeful waiting for casting decisions. Even the most rational actor's imagination is functioning on some separate set of nerve mechanisms, conjuring up visions of fame, good reviews, and the nearly unattainable, security. So, notwithstanding the bitter wisdom of twenty years in show business, Conrad could not help but be affected by the enthusiasm of both Luke and the agent. Stories of fantastic lucky

breaks fulfil in show business a function like anglers' tales and Conrad knew full well, that nothing was certain without a signed contract. But the pumping of his heart, the seemingly more rapid flow of his blood, and the funny anticipatory tightening of his stomach were there all the same.

Then he was once more plunged into despair by the sight of Joyce's clothing folded in neat piles beside the open bags. On the very top of one of these orderly rows he saw with a pang the green dress which Joyce had worn on their first evening together, the outfit which so singularly matched the colour of her eyes. Dully he sank into a chair and, shading his brow wearily with a hand, tried to force his muddled brain to form a strategy of reconciliation.

Perhaps a visit to the main house would alleviate his melancholy. At any rate he wanted to tell his boss about the proposed part, if only to give him some sort of notice should he have to fill Conrad's job at The Raven in a hurry. He could keep watch for Joyce just as well from the lighted warmth of the Ward's living room. According to his custom he walked in the back door unannounced. Jack Ward's voice roared from the living room, louder than Conrad had ever heard it.

'—guy's in love with you and you're a poor excuse for a woman as well as a damn fool if you let him get away.'

'It isn't any of our business, Jack ' It was Sally's voice. 'And you have no right to be talking to Joyce like that. She's upset and besides she's a guest in our house.'

'I don't give a shit.'

Jack's customary pallor was flushed beet red, Sally was in tears, and Joyce stood with her arms folded in front, her face cold as stone. It was this tableau which met the actor's eye as he entered the living room.

Sally stammered something unintelligible and withdrew to the rear of the house. Jack attempted to return to his usual grudging bad humour by mixing Conrad a drink. Joyce turned away for an instant and then regarded him with flinty eyes. It was all very embarrassing, just another of the tactless social blunders which he seemed always to be committing with Joyce.

She broke the stunned silence. 'I thought you were working.'

'I took the night off,' Conrad replied, with a meaningful glance at Jack, hovering uncertainly about the bar. The manager started, like an actor 'up in his lines' who suddenly remembers the cue, and walked swiftly off in the direction of his wife

'Look, Joyce, can't we talk this whole thing over?'

'There isn't anything to talk over' She shook her head impatiently. 'I just can't afford to be hurt. Anyway you don't need me. There are plenty of other girls in Hollywood. Just go down on the Boulevard—or out to Beverly Hills, if you prefer I don't care'

'Joyce, let's be sensible. Let's go down to the apartment where we can be alone' They were both speaking in lowered voices, and Conrad was conscious of the emotional overtones in the house 'I was in the wrong and I'm willing to admit it. But I ought to have the right to explain myself. Then, if you still want to leave—well, I'll help you pack But at least let's give it a chance.'

'All right, Conrad,' she said, although her face was unyielding 'I was hoping to end this thing with as little fuss as possible but—all right.'

They went down the path to the apartment single file with Joyce in the lead The waning moon glinted dully off the dark blue of the swimming pool. In the woods

beyond tiny night creatures made their familiar chitterings. Conrad knew that, even should he get the part in Millic's picture, he could not continue to live here without Joyce.

'Do you want a beer?' he asked as they walked into the living-room.

'No, thanks. But have one if you want.'

Conrad went to the kitchen and opened a can of beer. When he returned to the living-room Joyce was erect and forward, out of the grip of the sling chair. Her face was serious, almost pinched as she spoke.

'In the first place, Conrad, I guess I better tell you how *I* stand. I'm going to leave. I don't really want to, but I feel I have to. And I doubt very much if you will be able to talk me out of it.'

'That's not a very grown-up attitude to take. I don't deny my mistakes, but your objections are based on misunderstandings. That's why I want to talk it out. If you still want to leave after the misunderstandings are cleared up I won't try to stop you.'

'I don't think there are any "misunderstandings".' She put the word in quotes. 'It's just that I'll never be able to believe a thing you say after this.'

'That's ridiculous. I only told you one lie, and that was merely one of omission.' As he was saying it he remembered the encounter with Mennen Gilchrist.

'You told me at least two. What about Southern California?'

'What?' he said, genuinely bewildered by this sudden switch.

'Hollywood. You told me you liked it, and you really don't.'

'But, Joyce, it's just a town!' Conrad, who had seen too many cities to form any attachment for a single one

of them, had never been able to appreciate the fierce love Joyce bore for the city of her birth.

'It is not! And that's one of the main reasons I decided to leave you. Not because of any Chamber of Commerce pride, but because this is my home. You're not really happy here. Sooner or later you'll want to leave. Then what happens?'

'I don't dislike Hollywood.' But it sounded as if he were reading a line, trying not to give any single word an undue stress which would corrupt the meaning, throwing it away.

'No, but you don't *like* it,' she countered. 'I spotted that the first time I met you. You don't give Hollywood credit for having any character. It has though, just as much as New York or Paris or Buenos Aires or all the other cities you are always shouting about. Where else but here would a newsboy you've been getting your paper from for ten years pass you on the street without recognizing you because he'd never seen you outside of an automobile? Oh, there are hundreds of little things which make this city unique, but you never take the trouble to notice them or have any sense of participation.'

'You're making a big deal out of nothing,' he said reasonably. 'Even if all you say is true I've already committed myself to Hollywood. Hell, I may be here the rest of my life. Don't you remember? I'm out here trying to crack the movies.'

This was the time to tell her about the chance with Millic but he remained silent, unwilling to let what he considered an extraneous matter influence her decision. If she was weakening in his direction it would be a fitting climax to their reconciliation. If she persisted in leaving he could be sure, at least, that no such material consideration was involved.

'Don't worry,' she put in ironically. 'I won't be around to hold you back.'

'Now, that's what I mean by misunderstanding. You seem to have gotten some weird idea that I'm ashamed of you or something. It isn't that at all. There isn't any place to take you. All I ever do is go to Luke Barney's house, and once in a great while a party. As a matter of fact, I'm going to Luke's on Tuesday. If we're still together I would expect to take you. Only I hadn't told you before—about the acting—and, besides, I've seen very little of Luke since I met you. To tell the truth I much prefer my friends around The Raven, and Jack and Sally.'

'Conrad, you just can't live that way,' she countered practically. 'I've been in Hollywood too long not to know the pattern. If you want to be an actor you have to mingle with the people who can give you work. You may mingle and not get it, but you'll surely never get it if nobody knows who or where you are. It's a rotten life, Conrad, and I don't think I would fit into it.'

'So,' Conrad answered as levelly as he could through his rising temper, 'what you're saying is that you're leaving because of the insecurity of my profession—which is just what I was afraid of and the very reason I didn't tell you about it sooner.'

Joyce got out of the sling chair, and, moving over to the couch, straightened the piles of clothing absently.

'There's more to it than that, Conrad. The only privacy in California comes from anonymity. Fame or success is much more tangible here than in New York and it carries a heavier burden with it. If you're a failure in Hollywood you may be bitter but you are left alone. But everyone who works in the movies is expected to live like the movies. They are expected to run their lives to conform to the standard Hollywood plot. If they don't

they are cast out by the community, but, unlike other pariahs, because they have once achieved some measure of fame they are never again at peace in their solitude.'

'You're over-dramatizing, Joyce,' he retorted. 'There are plenty of Hollywood people—big stars, too—who lead perfectly normal lives. You should see how simply Luke Barney lives. And as for us—well, you can hardly pick up a fan magazine without reading about somebody's "perfect Hollywood marriage".'

'Sure, but they're just exceptions which Hollywood publicizes to show conformity to the moral pressures of the outside world—the audience. That's only the dummy left in the bed by the boy who sneaked down the rain-spout. The vast majority of picture people are children. The men are little boys walking on fences in front of little girls who, when the truth comes out, would rather have an expensive present or be taken to the circus by another little boy with more pocket money'

'Well, I wish you'd make up your mind. First you ball me out because I don't like Hollywood, and then *you* start to run it down.'

'But, Conrad,' Joyce explained. 'that's not my Hollywood. That's Beverly Hills and Encino and Bel-Air. My Hollywood's going to the beach, and casual clothes, and friendly neighbours, and the best streets to take through town to avoid the traffic, and the U.C L.A. football team, and—oh, I don't know. I just know that everything was going along peacefully and now *you* suddenly inform me you're going to jump on the merry go-round and grab for the brass ring along with the rest of those idiots. All I can say is that I get dizzy and I don't like to ride in the first place. I'm not a glamour girl, and there's no place in that world for someone who isn't.'

Conrad finished his beer and p the empty can on

the coffee table. Joyce picked it up mechanically and placed a coaster under it. His throat was dry as much from nervous tension as the talking; he started for the kitchen for another beer.

'Is there another one left for me?' Joyce asked.

Conrad opened two more cans and brought them back to the living-room. He handed one of them to the girl, watching her as he did so, hoping for some sign of yielding. But her face was still set rigidly, her usually mobile features expressionless. There was no longer any use in avoiding the main issue.

'All this talk about Hollywood and glamour girls isn't getting us anywhere,' he said flatly. 'You mean more to me than ten thousand glamour girls. As far as Hollywood is concerned, I'm an actor and this is where I've got to be. What it really amounts to is how much we love each other.'

All right, he had stated the basic problem openly at last. It was as if he had finally answered all the questions in a school test and handed in his paper. It was up to the teacher to grade it. Or, as on opening night, when the actors had done their parts, the fate of the show rested solely on the decision of the critics. He lit a cigarette and, clearing a space on the cluttered couch, sat down. Almost calm, staring at the rising smoke, he waited for her to make a reply.

'Conrad,' she began at last with the preciseness of one who has thought out carefully what is to be said. 'I love you very much. I've never before met anyone who affected me the way you do. But love is a two-way street. In the beginning I thought you were as crazy about me as I was about you. Now I don't know. Maybe our relationship has been too intellectual. I somehow don't get the feeling that you *want* me—that—I know it sounds corny, you

have a driving passion for me in your blood. It's important to me to be wanted and needed and it seems to me, especially since this acting thing has come up, that I'm not as important to you as I should be. What I want to say is, I love you, but do you love me?'

Conrad rose from the couch and took her in his arms. She stood limp, neither resisting nor responding to his embrace. He placed both hands on her round upper arms and looked into the green eyes, at the swimming tiny flecks of gold.

'I do love you, Joyce. And I need you. If I became a big star tomorrow it wouldn't mean a damn to me unless you were with me to share it. You've got to believe that.'

'One more thing.' She looked up at him solemnly, still unyielding to his pressure.

'Yes?'

'I have to know this, and you have to tell me the truth. Has there been—I mean, since us—has there been anybody else?'

'No one, darling, there never could be.'

And then suddenly Joyce was crying, just standing there with tears rolling down her cheeks. Conrad put his arm around her shoulder and with authoritative tenderness led her to the bedroom.

# 14

JOYCE hung her things back in the closet and events, on the surface at least, seemed to resume their normal easy pattern. But from the moment he had led the crying girl into the bedroom, in some mysterious way, their relationship had changed. The act of love had been more completely satisfying to both of them than for some time past but Conrad thought he detected, in the very fierceness with which she gave herself to him, some subtle act of withdrawal. And when they lay back together she slept not on his arm but curled in a tight ball with her back to him. And on the following morning, although there was nothing on which he could put his finger, there was a feeling of strain.

Conrad, essentially uncomplicated, was unprepared for any lingering uncertainty once Joyce decided to stay in the apartment. It disturbed him to detect, under the joking and *camaraderie* of old, new and bitter undertones. So, though he would have preferred to attribute it to his imagination, he was coming to a reluctant conclusion that her doubts had not been totally dispelled. Yet, since they were unspoken, indeed barely perceptible, he could think of no reasonable way to cope with them.

'More coffee?' she asked him.

'I guess I can stand another half cup.' Morning coffee was a ritual with them. It was a pleasant day again, and Conrad wondered whether the habit pattern would also carry them out to the pool. They quite often enjoyed a late breakfast followed by sunbathing and a refreshing

plunge; then Joyce would do her housework while Conrad read or pottered around the apartment.

This day seemed no different from the others, they had spent the morning on the sun-drenched patio in commonplace chit-chat containing no reference to the past crisis. But Conrad was bothered by the huge gaps left in his personal history by his secrecy. He wondered how, or even if, he should broach the subject. He did not want to probe wounds best left to heal by themselves nor did he, on the other hand, desire to repeat his past mistake. In the end, hoping to cut the almost impalpable threads of discord, he decided to broach the subject.

'You know, I've been a professional actor for twenty years. Since I first got my Equity card.' He stopped, not sure that this oblique approach was conveying his meaning. 'Now, don't get worried that I'm one of those guys who will be always talking about his career. I just mentioned it because it's that part of my life I didn't tell you about. I just wondered if you were interested.'

'You mean your credits?' There was something about the way she used the term, an astonishing airiness which almost gave the impression that Joyce might have wanted to be an actress herself. Because of his wariness of the entire topic before he had never seriously considered whether the germ of show business so deeply impregnated by her mother had not, in spite of the girl's professed scorn, taken root.

'That's right, my credits,' he replied, watching for reactions. 'I've done stock, rep, tent show, radio, television, the Broadway stage—not to mention a season on a showboat and one with a carnival.'

Although she was obviously familiar with the terms he used there was no visible evidence to bear out this

wild theory. However, as she evinced interest in more biographical data, he went on.

And throughout his sketchy recital of a life which did not differ materially from that of many other actors there was manifested a recurring motif of Luke Barney, as a single strand of red woven into dull grey tweed shows itself from time to time giving the fabric life. There had been gaps of years between their meetings when Luke had been in stock and Conrad had been barnstorming, or the time that Conrad was in the navy. But in capsuling it all for Joyce it became apparent just how pervading an influence was exerted upon him by his friend. He found it impossible to tell Joyce about himself without telling her about Luke as well.

During a year on the Federal Theatre Project Conrad had worked his way up to good character juvenile parts, although an irregular pixie face and stringbean body limited him to comedy roles or starved-youth-of-the-slums parts which were so popular in those days. The FTP had an exchange system of 'stars' among the various municipal projects with the idea in view to contribute variety and to give a wider audience to the actors developed in each city. It was on such an exchange deal that Luke Barney arrived in Washington from Philadelphia. Conrad remembered him as a tall, dark, intense young man with affected speech which must have been ridiculous but sounded like liquid gold to Conrad, who still struggled with a Virginian tendency to say 'about' for 'about' and 'hoase' for 'house'. There was no denying Luke Barney's driving energy and singleness of purpose. Indeed the zest and fervour he brought to his leading role made the play much better for having him in it, and Conrad followed him into his warehouse revolt as enthusiastically as the rest of the cast.

After the Federal Theatre their paths parted, Conrad setting out for New York willing, in his lofty ignorance to accept smaller parts at first. He quickly learned that even understudies were the object of bitter contest by actors with many more crédits and/or contacts than Conrad could boast. Unable to stand the pressure of poverty and idleness he joined a small circle stock company which played grange halls and fraternal auditoriums throughout the midwest during the winter. The following summer he floated down the Mississippi doing melodramas on a leaky showboat. He could save no money and was so completely typed in Toby parts that members of the regular audience gave delighted cries when they recognized him on the street without the red wig. So Conrad made the first of many subsequent returns to New York

While making the rounds he met Luke Barney again and by chance both were signed for a summer in the same stock company, Luke, of course, doing the leads. With a different bill every week they acted together in a number of plays and founded a mutual respect for each other. Luke still was dark and intense, and spoke so convincingly of chances in the offing for himself that Conrad could not help but share the handsome youth's conviction in his ultimate stardom. The fact that the company went broke and the manager skipped without paying the actors did not lessen their assurances to look one another up in New York.

But despite these assurances their lives diverged again for a period which, though short in time, was a very important one for Conrad. He learned about Stanislavski, worked in little theatres, familiarized himself with the common professional idioms, did more stock, joined a carnival, and got married. Conrad had begun to grow up.

Then in disgust Conrad had decided to give up the theatre and hitch-hiked across the country. It was from this period of his life, working on the construction gang and various other jobs, that he had filled out his background for Joyce. But once again there was the impelling urgency to go back to New York for 'one more crack at Broadway'. When he returned this time, Luke, who had stuck it out, was getting parts with some regularity.

But while Luke had remained at the grind Conrad had been gaining a different sort of experience. He had developed a mature confidence in himself and a deeper understanding of human motivation. Whether these played any direct part or not, he read for and managed to capture a replacement role in a current New York hit show. When this closed he was signed for another new play which died an ignominious death in Boston. He arrived back in New York on the day of Pearl Harbour and enlisted in the navy the following week.

After his discharge he looked up Luke Barney. The housing shortage and their old acquaintance which, considering the rapid turnover of Broadway hopefuls assumed the proportions of a lifelong friendship, dictated sharing an apartment. They took a brownstone flat in the mid-fifties, so they could walk to make the rounds, and kept it for two years. They were not always together, for Luke was often on the road and Conrad made a USO tour, but they shared with one another freely money, casting information, and towels until a year after the war Luke signed his Hollywood contract. Conrad had gone on in the same rut, working occasionally, at liberty more often, until the rise of television lessened in part the gnawing insecurity which had hitherto been the actor's lot.

Joyce had listened with interest, and Conrad felt better

for having told her the long story. Probably his misgivings earlier in the day had been self-induced by nerves and guilty conscience. They swam together and as he watched her tanned shapely body with the water shining sleekly on it, so supple as she surface-dived or hoisted herself short of breath and dripping on to the hot concrete bank, he laughed at himself for allowing his imagination to get the better of him.

So it was Conrad, in the mood for celebration, who expressed a desire for 'something fancy'. They went to dinner at one of the plush Sunset Strip clubs where, disregarding their phone calls for reservations and a five-dollar bill handed to the head waiter, they were seated in a far corner with their view of the show partially obstructed by a column. Conrad's contented silence while the acts were working was mainly attributable to professional courtesy since he occupied the bad seat at the table. But he had a festive feeling and was glad to note that Joyce was enjoying the show.

He glimpsed several famous faces in the audience, at better tables of course, and he found himself formulating a firm policy with regard to night-clubs should success come as a result of getting Millic's part. It occurred to him that he did not even know the name of the picture in which he might be so directly involved. Both Luke and Marvin Lurey knew it and had no doubt assumed that he did too, that he was sure to have read it in the trades. Conrad made a solemn promise to himself that, if he got the part, he would immediately take out subscriptions to *Motion Picture Daily* and *Daily Variety*. He must stop being so lackadaisical about his career.

'Well, you sure were on Cloud Twenty-three,' Joyce said dryly. 'What's the matter, couldn't you see the show?'

**'Not enough of it to tell.'** Conrad found himself clapping automatically. **'Joyce, I've got some news for you.'**

She drew herself back theatrically, but Conrad fancied there was an edge in her voice.

**'Not more, I hope.'**

**'I'm afraid so.'** He laughed. **'But this is good.'** He explained to her in detail the arrangements Luke had made to audition him for Millic.

**'So it all depends on what Millic thinks of your *Crime Busters* film, isn't that it?'** she summed it up.

**'That's about it,'** Conrad replied.

**'How is it?'**

**'I haven't seen it. I worked the night it was shown. But there isn't any reason why it should be bad. With all that I've told you now you ought to realize that I know my trade. All I ask is that I get one decent part, so I can show them what I can do, and the insecurity you were worrying about will become a thing of the past. If I get this part with Millic everything should be smooth sailing from here on.'**

**'I hope you get the part, Conrad,'** Joyce said seriously, taking his hand across the table. **'I want you to get it. But for heaven's sake, honey, don't make the mistake of being over-confident. You should know this isn't a new story. Every actor who comes out here talks the same way. One good break, and they'll have the town at their feet.'**

**'Sure, but I'm not *every* actor.'**

**'That's what every actor thinks'**

Conrad took the defensive. **'I've done a hell of a lot more things in my life than almost anybody—certainly more than the average actor. I've met all kinds of people and seen the way they behave. Just because I've had enough experience to learn my craft doesn't mean I spent**

all my life in the Broadway rat-race. I've been places, seen emotions, and I know how to project them.'

'Sure, you were an international bum. It may be wonderful background but in Hollywood they call it goofing off.' Her fingers tightened on his. 'I'm not trying to carp and run you down, honey. I just don't want you to take an unrealistic attitude about it. If there's a broken heart for every light on Broadway there's an automobile in L.A. for every "break" that didn't pan out.'

Although it was a common enough Hollywood speech pattern Conrad was disconcerted to hear Joyce using the same word as Luke had in referring to his erratic past. Yet he could not believe that it would have been right for him to stay doggedly in New York, as Luke had done. Indeed he had often wondered how, considering the insularity of his life, the star managed to give such consistently three-dimensional performances.

'Don't you see, honey?' Joyce was continuing. 'Now that we're in this thing together, I feel I have as much at stake as you. And there's more to it than whether or not you get this or any other part. There are important emotional factors as well. If you are going to worry yourself sick every time you are up for a job we'll both be nervous wrecks within a year. The safest way is to realize the odds are against you and plan your life accordingly. I want you to be a success, Conrad, for both our sakes, but if it doesn't happen the world won't come to an end.'

'Well, anyway, we'll know about it on Tuesday.' Conrad put an end to the discussion. There is a strong tradition in show business which, no doubt originating in practical wisdom, places an almost superstitious taboo against talking about a part before it is actually acquired. He was glad he had gone into it at such length with Joyce, however, for the clasp of her hand across the

narrow night-club table dispelled finally any earlier reservations. He looked at her happily.

'I think you're going to like Luke,' he said. 'Hollywood hasn't changed him at all.'

Joyce laughed in her old way. 'I've heard that somewhere before.'

'No, it's true. You find out things about guys when you room with them. I don't say he's perfect. But the faults he has are the same ones he always had and, as nearly as I can tell, he hasn't acquired any new ones.'

'Are we going to get dinner?'

'I hope so. Why?'

'I hope he'll have bread.'

'I suppose he will. Why?'

'The only time I ever had dinner with a star,' she told him, 'there was no bread on the table. You know I like bread with my meals. Somebody asked him if he was on a diet but he told us he had eaten so many sandwiches in his broke days that he has never eaten a slice of bread since he signed his contract.'

'No, honey, Luke is just a regular guy. You'll see when you meet him.'

The next show came on, and Joyce offered to change seats with Conrad. Actually neither of them really wanted to stay, so Conrad paid the cheque and they left, a uniformed parking attendant driving up the Buick with a flourish. Conrad handed the attendant a half-dollar. Joyce had slipped quickly behind the wheel, so Conrad got in the other side.

'Do you want to step into The Raven for a drink?' he asked.

'Uh-uh. Let's put the top down.'

Joyce, like most of the Californians he had met, liked to drive. She turned on the radio and drove out Sunset

to Benedict Canyon, then turned up into Cahuengas. She never tired of the lighted patchwork of Los Angeles seen from these mountains, though she did not, like so many of the natives would have, point a finger into the galaxy to indicate an area which was vacant pasture less than a year ago. Conrad could identify no individual buildings except the Statler, to which he had never been, but thanks to his early exploratory rides with Luke was able to determine the outline of each district as on a vast lighted sales chart.

'Just like old times,' he said.

'Kids in a car.'

'Is that bad?' He kissed her. She pressed herself tightly to him and he felt a calm peace. His conscience was clear, and Joyce was with him once again.

They sat silent for a while and then spoke the same thing in unison.

'You know what I think?'

They laughed and Joyce told Conrad to go first.

'Well,' he said, 'I was just glad we didn't have to go to a motel tonight. How about you?'

Joyce giggled. 'I was thinking that now you can meet mother if you want to. She'll love you. Just as long as you're in the picture business.'

# 15

THE remaining days until Tuesday were combined torment and delight for Conrad. His delight stemmed from the peace which pervaded his home. Once the issues, both overt and tacit, were clearly decided, neither of them made any reference to the split and the days took on an even, placid tenor as before. In fact, Conrad thought them happier now that he no longer lived a daily lie with Joyce. His torment sprang from the agonizing uncertainty of the pending audition.

It was a familiar enough experience. He had gone on many interviews during his career, but the importance as well as the unorthodoxy of this one aggravated and heightened the usual symptoms. The average person might experience these alternating shifts between gloom and gaiety once or twice in a lifetime, on the day of a wedding or possibly awaiting the arrival of a first grandson. While there always exists the outside possibility of some fateful pronouncement on the wedding day or some mishap resulting in a tragic birth, the expectations are normally happy ones. But the actor goes through these same ups and downs many times in a year knowing that, as long as the law of probabilities functions it will end disastrously for him. Furthermore, the acuteness of the disease is in direct proportion to how badly he needs the work.

Conrad desperately wanted the job, for if he played the part as well as he was convinced he could, he would immediately attain standing as an actor. So this was an

ordinary interview magnified many times not only by the considerable financial gain it offered but also by the fact that it might launch him on a career. Joyce, if she could not experience the same emotions as Conrad, knew they were occurring and bore with his increasing edginess.

By Tuesday Conrad had abandoned any pretences he might have had to living in the usual routine and was distraught. For one thing he was worried about the bar. At work the relief man said Jack had phoned to say he would not be in. The relief man, who was delighted at getting more work, had asked no particulars. There had been no signs of life in the house on the hill and Conrad was afraid they might have gone on a trip before he had a chance to ask his boss for Tuesday night off.

He was up early although The Raven did not open until noon. He bolted his breakfast, even refusing the traditional second cup of coffee, and went out to fidget in the sun. Around eleven Conrad suggested that they drive down to the bar rather than wait and telephone as he was anxious to talk to Jack personally, especially since he might be leaving permanently.

'But I don't intend to do any drinking,' he told her. 'Not before an interview.'

'We'll have a coke,' Joyce said.

Conrad took the Buick and left it to be washed, then both drove to The Kaven in the little Ford. There were only two customers, one of the regulars and a man who had obviously just stepped in for a quick shot. Conrad could never enter a bar without this instantaneous appraisal. The bar-tender should know where each customer is at all times, which requires a constant if unconscious vigilance. Jack was behind the bar, bored.

'Two cokes,' Conrad said, noticing the curve of her back tight against Joyce's suit as she leaned over the bar.

'Cokes, huh?' Jack grunted. 'All ice and no profit. How are you, Joyce?'

'Fine. Excuse me while I comb my wind-blown hair.' Joyce made a tactful exit to the ladies' room.

'Jack,' he said. 'Have you got a minute?'

'Minute?' He looked at his watch sourly. 'I've got the whole damn shift. What do you want, another night off?'

Conrad was taken aback. 'Well—yes, as a matter of fact.'

'You know what your last night off cost me, don't ya? I got in a beef with my old lady.'

'With Sally? Because of us?'

'Well, yeah, in a way. But don't blame yourselves about it. We have 'em regular every six months or so. She takes a powder for a couple of days. Or a week sometimes. It depends. I go to a hotel. It's more like a vacation, not that she doesn't get mad enough.'

'I'm sorry, Jack. And I know I really shouldn't be asking you but I wasn't kidding about the night off. I wouldn't ask again except that it's very important.'

'A show, huh? First thing I know I'm going to be losing my bar tender.'

'It's an interview.' Conrad explained as rapidly as possible the situation with Luke and that he might seriously have to quit The Raven

'I hope you get it, kid,' Jack replied 'But win, lose or draw you always got a job with me. I see you're drinkin' coke now but when you find out what happens drop in and I'll buy you a drink. Better, if you get it you can buy *me* a drink.'

'I'll be in tomorrow, anyway,' Conrad said and thanked him.

But the fact that he was straightened out with Jack did little to relieve Conrad's jumpv nerves as the time drew

near. Back at the apartment he carefully laid out the clothes he intended to wear that evening, while Joyce worked in the kitchen.

'What do you want to eat? I thought I'd fix a nosh,' she called out to him.

'No thanks, honey,' he replied. 'I never eat before an interview.'

'But you said he might serve dinner?' she said, coming into the living-room.

'He probably will. But I'm not going to eat any of it. Food dulls me. I like to have my nerves sharp.'

She laughed. 'If you get them any sharper you'll cut yourself and bleed to death before you ever see Millic.'

Joyce's background had given her some understanding of Hollywood procedure and she had suggested in an abrupt about face from her previous position, that it might be wise to defer her meeting with Luke Barney until another time. As the arrangements were primarily of a business nature her presence might affect his chances adversely. Conrad pointed out that the job would be decided on the merits of the film not who came there with him.

The social trial ahead loomed largely in Joyce's mind and she brought it up indirectly as they were dressing. Joyce was seated before her dressing table applying lipstick painstakingly with a small brush. She looked up and their eyes met in the glass.

'Do you think I'm pretty, Conrad?' she asked in a bantering tone.

'I think you're gorgeous, honey,' he answered absently.

'Well, you might say so once in a while.' A serious note snapped him back from his reverie. He winked at her in the mirror, knowing as he did so that his effort to keep it light was going to be a failure.

'I've always had you figured as a girl who was above the vanity of the flesh.' He was right, her face was strained. 'I always think you're pretty. If I seldom say so it's because I didn't think you'd care about hearing.'

'All right, skip it,' she said sharply.

He remembered a line of poetry which expressed perfectly how he felt about her but was loath to add it as an argument after the fact.

I grant I never saw a goddess go.

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.

But compliments had always come hard to Conrad who believed that esteem was better expressed in deeds than words. They left the apartment in silence.

Joyce's first reaction to Luke Barney's house was much the same as Conrad's had been. Like most of her fellow citizens, she used stars' palatial dwellings as landmarks in the same way that Europeans use cathedrals and castles. She would never have bought a movie map on Sunset Boulevard any more than a Parisian would buy a Baedeker, but often while driving she would exclaim, as if suddenly seeing an old acquaintance, 'Oh, there's Carmen Miranda's house, it's only a couple of blocks more' Conrad often wondered why with her antipathy to the movies she would have such information at her fingertips.

'It isn't very grand, is it?' she said.

'I told you he lived simply,' he replied.

Conrad had come to be quite fond of Luke's house, which was designed in lop-sided opulence which mirrored Luke's interests. The swimming pool and accessories, as well as the over-authentic bar, were complete and in the same way, the master bedroom had a certain magnificence, but the rest of the house was barely functional. The sole

comfortable place for guests was the living-room where, Conrad was sure, the buffet dinner would be served. Clara had replaced the plain yellow smock which she customarily wore with a black maid's uniform with lace trimmings; which Conrad rightly assumed was a tribute to Millic.

'How do you do, Mr Eldred.' She smiled at him. She would have escorted them into the living-room, but Conrad demurred.

'We're early. Besides I know the way.'

Luke was in his stocking feet, trying to fit a cuff-link into a stiff white shirt. There was a large fire laid to which he had apparently just touched a light.

'Joyce Rayner, Luke Barney,' Conrad said, as if stepping back.

Luke strode over to her and held out a hand, the open shirt cuff flopping white against his deeply tanned wrist.

'Hi,' he said cordially.

'How do you do' Joyce took his hand. 'I'm afraid we're a little early.'

'Not at all. As a matter of fact you're just on time.' He did a rueful take on the open shirt sleeve 'Here, buddy,' he said to Conrad, to whom he handed the cuff link.

'You never did have enough sense to get them started before you put the shirt on,' Conrad said as he bent to the task. Luke was asking Joyce if she wanted a drink but Clara had anticipated him and came in with a tray containing decanters of whisky, mix, and a bowl of ice.

'Conrad tells me you're a whisky drinker, Joyce. If you'd rather have something else, name it.'

'Conrad told you true. With water and ice.'

There was a pause while Luke fixed the drinks.

'I don't mean to seem abrupt' Luke,' Conrad said. 'But

how soon is it going to happen. I mean, I don't want to get slopped or anything.'

Luke laughed. 'Take it easy, man. Millic's no play-boy, so you'll be out of your misery before very long. We made it for eight-thirty. He'll be here at a quarter to nine and out of the house by ten. It couldn't be more painless, no matter how it turns out. Look, if you don't want to drink, why don't you take Joyce and show her around the place while I finish dressing.' He turned to the girl. 'You'll excuse me, won't you?

Joyce nodded and he picked up his drink and walked out of the bar into the bedroom.

'Well?' Conrad said when he had closed the door. He wanted her to like Luke.

'He seems very nice, as well as good looking. It was rather embarrassing to get here before he's even had time to dress.'

'He's very informal. I don't think he thought anything about it. After all, I used to room with the guy.'

'He *was* quite gracious about it. Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean anything.'

'Oh, for Christ' sake, Joyce!' he burst out. 'Stop worrying about Luke. Worry about Millic if you have to worry about somebody.'

'I'm not worried about anybody. And I wish you wouldn't either.' She soothed him. 'Conrad, it'll probably come out all right. Don't get yourself so upset.'

'I'm sorry, honey,' he said. 'Thank God it isn't going to take any longer than it is. Millic sounds like a decent guy. Usually, the very sensitivity a producer demands in the performer he refuses to recognize in the human being. One thing, I'll never again get the chance to have an interview under such pleasant conditions. Do you want to see the rest of the house?'

'Sure.' Joyce took his arm. 'Lead on, Macbeth.'

'Macduff.'

'I knew it. I just wanted to see if you did. Where do we start?'

'I thought we could look at the swimming pool first and work our way in. That way, we ought to get back to the bar about the same time as Luke.'

His services as a guide were little better than mechanical. His stomach was tight as stretched rubber. He was trying to reconstruct from a dimmed memory his brief encounter with Millic at the party. At the time Conrad had attached scarcely more importance to his meeting with Millic than the producer must have to his with Conrad. How could he have supposed then that this man, whom he could now barely remember, would have such a power to affect his life?

When they returned to the living-room Clara had just finished laying out the buffet supper. Its variety and arrangement made Conrad conscious for the first time that Luke had spent a great deal of money on an affair which was, after all, primarily for Conrad's benefit. As he had predicted Luke was dressed and in the bar when they finished their tour of inspection. Joyce exclaimed gleefully at the sight of the slot machine and Conrad handed her some change.

'You've always had good timing, Conrad,' the star said. 'I was just going to fix a drink.'

'I don't think so, Luke. Thanks'

'Relax, will you? You behave like you just graduated from the American Academy. How about you, Joyce? Whisky, ice and water?'

Luke mixed the drinks, deftly for an amateur. Whether he had some mistaken delicacy about Conrad's job or because he liked to do it himself Conrad had never been

allowed to tend bar while the star was there. Conrad carried Joyce's drink over to the slot machine.

'Doing any good, honey?' He slipped an arm about her waist.

'Not very.'

'A guy's got to pay his rent,' Luke said jovially from behind the counter.

The doorbell rang and Conrad looked involuntarily at his watch.

'That's probably your agent,' Luke said. 'He called me up to find out what time. I told him to get here a little early so you two could get together on your story. There's no sense in having him tell Millic one thing and you turn around and tell him something else.'

'Thanks, Luke, but there's no danger of that. All I ever told Lurey was the truth. Thank God, I've done enough things that I don't have to pad my experience.'

'I know that, Con. But these agents get carried away, or they forget and then make up something. I don't say that's true of Lurey, but there isn't any harm in making sure.'

As Clara showed Lurey into the bar Joyce got a pay on the slot machine. The agent looked around sharply at the sound and Conrad intercepted a swiftly veiled glance of inquiry cast at Luke, Luke, too, caught the glance and indicated with some subtle motion of his eyes and head that the girl would present no trouble. Lurey, having apparently got the impression that Joyce was Luke's girl, relaxed. Conrad realized that Joyce had been right and, if it made no difference to Luke, Lurey would no doubt think it highly inappropriate to bring a girl on an interview of this importance.

Lurey smiled and shook hands with Luke across the bar. 'Hello, Luke. I saw *The Willow Tree* last week. I

thought you were terrific. But then you know how much I've always-liked your work.'

'Thanks ' Luke grinned. 'I'm sort of friendly with some of yours.' He gestured to Conrad, then to the girl at the slot machine. 'And this is Joyce Rayner.'

Joyce and the agent exchanged minimal greetings and Lurey placed a hand on Conrad's shoulder.

'Well, baby doll,' he said breezily, 'here goes nothing.'

'Would you like a drink, Marvin?' Luke asked, in the easy Hollywood custom of first names.

'No, thanks I don't drink. You can't play golf and drink. Maybe Ben Hogan can, but I can't. If you have coke that will be fine.'

Luke poured the agent a Coca-cola. 'Millic ought to be here pretty soon. If you two want to talk anything over before he gets here why don't you go into the living-room. I think there's something to eat, so help yourselves.'

'Thanks, Luke,' Lurey replied. 'It never hurts to know what you're doing. Come on, baby.'

Conrad led the agent into the living-room. Clara was standing near the buffet table, more or less at attention. Lurey surveyed the room rapidly.

'There are times like this when I wish I was a bachelor,' he said. 'Not often, but times like this. Do you want to grab something to eat?'

'No, thanks,' Conrad said

'Nervous, huh?' Lurey forked two slices of turkey on to a plate which Clara handed him 'Baby, I know how you feel. Did you know I used to be an actor?'

'I think Luke Barney mentioned it when he sent me to you.'

'It seems like a long time ago. The pace is so slow in Hollywood time passes fast, you know what I mean?'

Lurey finished filling his plate and moved to the couch in front of which Conrad was standing. He motioned the actor to sit down and Conrad obeyed silently.

'Now, listen, Conrad. I hope you aren't going to clam up on me. I know you're nervous, but you've been on interviews before. I don't say bend his ear, but producers like to know that their actors are able to talk.'

'Don't worry. I'll be all right with Millic. It depends on the film, anyway, doesn't it?

'Sure, but he has to be sold. I'll do most of that when I talk to him, but you got to help. Just be yourself around him. Now, just so there won't be any mistake, run through your credits again for me.'

Conrad gave him a brief résumé, naming all the Broadway shows. The agent listened attentively as he ate. Although Conrad was proud of his achievements in the theatre he could not help but think how meagre they must appear to Millic who, by the power of his money and prestige, could summon to work for him the biggest of Broadway stars. Lurey, however, appeared satisfied—even impressed—nodding his head at the mention of titles he recalled.

'No pictures, huh?' he asked when the actor had finished.

'No.'

'Maybe it's just as well. There's no chance of him digging up some ten-day wonder produced by a floor-walker from the May Company that you made when you were broke. There's no such thing as a picture-proof actor any more than there is an actor-proof picture. That *Crime Busters* was good and if I didn't think so I wouldn't be letting you do this. Just take it easy and let old Marvin pitch for you.'

'There'll be other parts,' Conrad said faintly.

'That's the only way to look at it. It's just another interview.' Lurey gestured with his fork, his voice ringing like a coach at half-time. 'There may be a chance to settle the whole thing tonight. I brought out a contract like I told you I would over the phone. If Millic likes you I want your okay to talk salary to him.'

To the actor accustomed to Broadway pay scales Hollywood rates seem astronomical. Established people in Hollywood draw down as much money for playing secondary roles as a Broadway star, and for minor parts which in New York are eagerly sought at Equity minimum the picture actor is paid a princely amount. Conrad hastened to say that whatever salary Millic and Lurey agreed upon was perfectly all right with him.

'Conrad,' the agent spoke with his mouth full. 'I wonder if you really realize what a break this could be for you.'

'Don't worry about that! Why the hell do you think I'm so nervous?'

'Oh, I know,' Lurey replied easily, 'a big part in a big picture. You'll make some money and you may even have a temporary fame. But in the long pull it's how you're handled that's going to make the difference between success and failure. Everybody who comes into my office wants to be a movie star. I tell them, you don't want to be a movie star, you want to play character parts. Because if you play character parts and you're properly handled you can last in Hollywood twenty years. That's what I mean by saying this part will be a break for you.'

'I hope so.'

'Another thing—do you know how to ride?'

'Ride?'

'Sure, this is a western. You're not expected to do Flying Ws or anything like that, but it's one of the first things

Millic's sure to ask me is whether you can sit on a horse without falling off while a scene's being shot.'

'I don't know,' Conrad replied. 'I haven't been on a horse since I was a kid. Back home in Virginia I used to ride a lot, but that was a long time ago.'

'It's just like swimming,' the agent assured him. 'Once you learn you don't forget. I'll tell him you can ride.'

When they returned to the bar Joyce was still playing the slot machine, and Luke was standing beside her. He looked around and grinned at Conrad. ♦

'She's used all my change. I'm going to have to take the back of the machine off to get her some new ammunition.'

Luke had a small cash register on his back bar which he kept full of nickels for the machine. He had explained to Conrad one day that the slot machine was a present from his manager, an exceedingly close man with Luke's money, who had given it to him with the understanding that the proceeds be applied to the star's liquor bill. The gift had been a success, having actually reduced it by about one-third. Luke, being a non gambler himself shilled for it mercilessly.

'Did you two get everything straightened out?' Luke addressed the agent.

'It's in the bag,' Lurey replied. 'Was the film delivered all right?'

Luke said it was and he and the agent began to talk about projection rooms, making polite conversation as people in Virginia did about dogs or the customers in The Raven did about automobiles. Conrad walked over to Joyce.

'Didn't they ever have slot machines in Hollywood?' he asked her.

'Sure,' she answered, not taking her eyes from the spin-

ning wheels. They dropped to a stop one by one—a cherry, an orange and a bell. The gentle whirring of the internal mechanism stopped. 'I never expect to beat them. I like to watch the wheels go around. But it's better if I stay out of Las Vegas.'

Conrad laughed. 'I'll make a mental note of that. If we ever go there I'll lock you in the room.'

Then came the chime for which the whole room had subconsciously been alerted. Conrad looked at his watch. It was seventeen minutes to nine. He glanced back at Luke and the agent and saw that both had made the same instinctive gesture when they heard the doorbell. Luke strode rapidly towards the living room. Lurey was right at his heels, his face intent as he flung over his shoulder crisply.

'Lay off that slot machine.'

Joyce pressed Conrad's arm tightly for an instant and then took her hand away. He followed into the living-room. Now reflexes developed over twenty years took hold. He felt totally aware of everything, no matter how trivial, which might affect Millic or influence his decision. This heightened perceptivity was the end product of countless hours spent waiting in offices during which the actor's hypertension lends great significance to the most prosaic acts and utterances. Luke, as an actor, understood this as indeed did most producers who were usually careful to make each word and gesture as flat and uncommunicative as possible when dealing with aspiring talent.

Millic was shaking hands with Lurey and saying, 'I haven't seen you since the party for *Spills for Joy*.'

Conrad knew it was customary for the producer to throw a party on the last day of shooting, primarily for the crew, but to which he invited every one who worked on the picture at all.

**'That was a terrific picture. You'll probably cop some Awards,' Lurey replied, then spying Conrad in the doorway, went on. 'Here's another one of my people.'**

Conrad walked over to them and Lurey placed an arm on his shoulder, hunched over slightly like a boxer's second standing with his boy as the referee gives the final instructions before the bell.

**'Conrad Eldred, this is George Millic.'**

**'How do you do?'** Conrad said, and shook hands.

**'How do you do?'** the producer replied politely. His voice did not now seem quite as high and piercing as Conrad remembered it from the party. **'You're from New York, I think.'**

**'Yes, I am.'**

**'How do you like Hollywood?'**

Conrad said, **'Very much.'** Clara entered with a tray of drinks. As she mixed a scotch and soda for Millic, Conrad collected his first swift impression.

The producer was attired in a dark blue business suit, remarkably like those worn by Conrad's father, but Millic lacked the physical stature to achieve his dignified presence. All three of the men in the room dwarfed the producer, and Conrad, having no idea how they might look from Millic's height, moved over to stand by Luke. Since he was nearly as tall as the star Conrad wanted to be sure the producer knew it. Beneath Millic's polite affability Conrad caught an air of impatient directness about the man. Luke, who had been on his share of interviews, sensed it too.

**'If it's okay with you, George,'** he said, **'I thought we could run the film now. Conrad was out of town when it was released so he hasn't seen it yet himself and I guess he's kind of anxious. After it's over we can all sit around and get drunk and tear it to pieces.'**

Millic laughed and fished out a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. 'You can get drunk, Luke, because you're an actor and have no worries—except to be on the set on time. Right, Marvin?' The agent nodded and laughed with him. 'I wouldn't want to keep Conrad waiting and since I'll have to leave early we can have it whenever you're ready.'

'Okay,' Luke replied. 'We're all set to run it. The projection room is out here—actually it's a spare bedroom I had fixed over,' he explained, leading the producer from the room.

Marvin Lurey made a quick circle of his thumb and forefinger to Conrad and they followed. A group of sofas and easy chairs, each equipped with a table for drinks and ash-trays, were placed in staggered lines facing a movie screen. In the rear of the room near the door, was a projection booth fashioned of plywood. Clara had laid out cold cuts and crackers which Millic did not eat. And although the producer had brought his drink along, it was barely touched. Conrad took a seat behind and off to one side of the producer, not wanting to appear to be watching the man's reactions. The agent himself occupied a third seat at a similar distance so that the three of them formed a rough triangle. Luke was not in the room, presumably seeing to the projector. There was an overhead light, rather than lamps. Millic turned in his seat and faced Marvin Lurey.

'How's business been, Marvin?'

'I can't complain. Of course the industry's slow right now, but personally I have no kick.'

A bright rectangle appeared on the screen and the overhead light went off. The producer hunched back around in his seat. Conrad heard the humming of the projector and suddenly with a blare of music the main title flashed

on the screen. Conrad had not yet come to watch the credits with avidness, but both Lurey and Millic were rapt from the instant it started and seemed not to hear a slight noise in the back of the room as Luke brought Joyce in just before the story began.

Conrad had a good part, being on the screen during most of the action. It was the first time he had ever seen himself on the screen and it was a strange and wonderful experience, although completely unreal. The tight close-ups were grotesque and in the long shots he resembled a naggingly familiar doll. Glaringly awkward movements of that figure who looked like himself sprung from the scene, impossible enunciations of lines ground his ears with jarring unpleasantness. As he watched the fast-paced film unfold it was as if someone had stunned him and he was having a distorted dream, in which all the other people have no identity.

And each succeeding warped image of himself recalled some ordinary episode which had occurred six months before. At a dramatic moment with the hero Conrad remembered how, after hours passed with tape measure, light meter, make-up, and adjustment of the camera, a gelatine slide had fallen from the flies in the middle of the scene. At another part, in his Broadway habit of picking up cues rapidly, he had overlapped and the director had explained to him why it was impossible to edit a blended speech. Then, before he knew it, the bright rectangle was once more on the screen.

As the light came on he had no idea whether he was good or bad. The whole sensation had been so bizarre and over so quickly that, had he not known the script, he would have lost the plot. In trying to watch too many things at one time he had seen nothing. He was still sitting, dazed, when Millic rose and spoke to him. Conrad

noticed that the horn-rimmed glasses changed his face, making him look slightly younger.

'This is irregular,' he smiled slightly, 'having an actor present when I see his film. I'm glad you were good and I don't have to be embarrassed.'

'Did you ever know me to have a bad actor?' Lurey said triumphantly, drowning out Conrad's pleased, 'Thank you.'

'You agents' Millic shook his head in mock despair. 'I suppose you want to talk to me now?'

Luke strode out of the projection booth and taking Conrad's arm pulled him from the seat and started him towards the door. 'See, I told you it was good. Now we can go out in the living-room and have a drink.'

The star poured a stiff shot from the decanter and handed it to his friend. Joyce was standing by the fireplace. She came up to him.

'It was very good, Conrad,' she said softly.

The actor shook his head. 'I couldn't tell. It looked to me like it was terrible.'

Luke Barney laughed. 'You won't get over that for a while yet. It took me five pictures. Lurey's going to stay in there and pitch Millic. Why don't you two relax in here for a moment while I go and talk to Clara. And for God's sake, Conrad, drink that drink. You need it, and Millic's no puritan. I think you got it, Con. Anyway, I know he liked you. The only thing now is that he may think it's too big a role for a guy with as little picture experience. But I think you got it!'

The star grinned and went out towards the bar. Conrad walked over and stood staring into the fire. Joyce came to his side.

'It really was good, honey,' she said. 'I think Luke's

right. You're going to get the part. Why else would Lurey and Millic have to talk?

'Maybe you're right. I just hope it doesn't take too long.' He wheeled to face her. 'My God, Joyce, I don't know the first thing about motion picture acting and you could tell it on every foot of the film.'

The doorbell rang and was followed by voices in the hall at once, suggesting that the visitors had not waited for the maid.

Judging from the noise and laughter there were several people and Conrad could distinguish the broad accents of Patrick Guilfoyle. His heart sank. It was easy to envisage a scene in which Patrick, if he was as drunk as he sounded, would so thoroughly disgust Millic that Conrad would not only lose the part but the producer would carry away a lastingly unfavourable impression of him. Lurey as well was sure to be annoyed and Conrad hoped that, if they were actually invited, Luke could settle them down. But Patrick was already in the room.

'Sure, and if it ain't Conrad!' His Irishness always grew more pronounced in his cups. 'And a colleen as well. I didn't know you were having a party.'

'Listen, Pat.' Conrad came up to him urgently. 'Millic's in the other room. I haven't time to explain right now. I'll meet you in the bar.'

Guilfoyle let out a loud guffaw. 'You can think of a better excuse than that. No, my boy, you have to introduce me to the mavourneen because I'm your friend. If you don't think I'm your friend, just wait until you see what I've brought you. I've got a surprise for you and——' He bowed drunkenly towards Joyce who had seated herself on the couch. 'Mr Millic.'

Patrick tacked out of the living-room towards the hallway. Joyce looked at Conrad with a worried frown

'Who's that?'

'It's Patrick Guilfoyle. I better go find Luke. I don't think he invited them, but Patrick comes here a lot.'

Conrad started for the bar but Patrick was back again.

'See what the little people brought back from the end of the rainbow,' he said, gesturing broadly and executing another bow.

Sherry appeared in the doorway. She, too, had obviously had a great deal to drink. She ran up to Conrad and, throwing her arms around his neck, kissed him full on the lips.

'Where the hell did you go the night of the party? Do you think it's nice to leave a girl stranded like that? But I forgive you. You know why? Because you're cute.' She attempted to embrace him again.

Conrad pushed her away, his one idea being to get her from the room into which Millic and Lurey might at any moment enter.

'Listen, Sherry, let's go out to the bar for a minute.'

In the meantime Patrick had crossed over and introduced himself to Joyce. She acknowledged it briefly, excused herself, and walked past Conrad and Sherry as if they were not there. Patrick followed her in alcoholic persistence.

'Chaplin at least used the screen as an individual art form.' It was Marvin Lurey's voice, as the door at the far end of the living-room opened.

'Get the hell out of here before you get hurt,' Conrad grated in the tones a bar-tender uses as a last resort on a troublesome drunk, backing his words with firm physical assistance. Whether or not the entry of the strange men registered with her, she did not resist. He wiped his mouth hard with the handkerchief in his breast pocket. Neither Millic nor Lurey seemed to notice anything out

of the way. Lurey was jovial, but that would be true no matter what the results. The little producer smiled slightly and walked over to Conrad with his hand extended.

'I'll be happy to have you do the part, Conrad,' he said politely. 'Marvin knows all the details. I have a dinner appointment, and I hope you'll excuse me if I leave now. I think we'll have a very pleasant association.' He included them both in his final remark. 'I know the way out, so would you be good enough to explain to Luke.'

Millic said good-bye to both of them and left. Conrad was charmed by the extreme graciousness of the little producer.

'Signed sealed and delivered.' Lurey was now openly jubilant. 'Five hundred a week with a six-week guarantee. You were very, very good, baby doll. You might as well sign it now.'

Conrad signed three contract forms which the agent produced from his inside pocket and they shook hands ceremoniously. There was a sudden burst of laughter from the bar, from the volume it appeared that Patrick and Sherry had brought friends.

'What the hell is that?' Lurey asked.

'Some people crashed. They're friends of Luke's.'

'God almighty! Barney and his girls. You'd think he could stay out of the saddle one night in the year. It's a good thing Millic didn't see them. I'm taking off. I'm a married man and Hollywood is a small town. Just when you think you've found a place where nobody will see you, some other meshugeh who's trying to hide too shows up. Only he hasn't got the sense to keep his mouth shut about you and pretty soon everybody in town knows your business. You can't hide anything in California, so the safest thing is never do anything you have to hide.'

I'll call the trades tonight. They may start shooting right away or wait until next week, but if you have any questions give me a ring at the office. I'll let you know as soon as the director gives me your call. Congratulations, baby.'

Anxious to tell Luke about getting the part and worried about Joyce, he started for the bar. Patrick was apparently telling another of his stories, for all was quiet except for his voice and an occasional anticipatory giggle. There was a burst of laughter as Conrad walked in. Although there were several men and girls neither Luke nor Joyce were in the room.

Thinking the story was over, Conrad said, 'Hi. Where's Luke and Joyce?'

'They went that-a-way, pardner.' Patrick spoke urgently, as one who is interrupted just when he is making his point, and jerked a thumb in the direction of the closed bedroom door.

'Don't be a point killer. This one has a double snapper.'

Turning back to his audience who were leaning forward in expectation of the final tagline, Patrick declaimed, 'And so he said to her, 'Hell, I thought the leading man always got the girl in the end!'''

As Conrad stared at the closed bedroom door his world fell around him in a crash of laughter.